

Martian Metamorphoses: The Planet Mars in Ancient Myth and Religion

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INTRODUCTION

Earthlings have long been fascinated by the planet Mars. Well before modern science fiction speculated about advanced civilizations on Mars and the dire threat of invasion at the hands of little green men, the red planet was regarded as a malevolent agent of war, pestilence, and apocalyptic disaster. In an attempt to appease the capricious planet-god, ancient cultures offered it human sacrifices. What is there about this distant speck of light that could inspire such bizarre conceptions culminating in ritual murder? And how do we account for the fact that virtually identical beliefs will be found around the globe, in the New World as well as the Old? The present book will seek to address such questions.

For untold millennia prior to the advent of scientific astronomy and well before there were any records which could properly be called historical, human beings recounted myths surrounding their favorite heroes and gods. Prominent themes in these sacred traditions include the Creation, the Deluge, the wars of the gods, and the dragon-combat. Despite the passage of thousands of years and the destruction of

countless cultures, such myths were committed to memory and told again and again primarily because they represented sacred knowledge regarding the history of the world. Until recently, however, such traditions have been given short shrift by scholars in general and all but ignored by mainstream science. This is most apparent, perhaps, in the modern astronomer's faith that more can be learned about the recent history of our solar system from running computer simulations than from considering what our ancestors had to say on the matter.

If we are to overcome this modern prejudice and properly evaluate the ancients' testimony, how best to proceed? From a methodological standpoint, it is possible to investigate the ancient reports surrounding Mars from several different vantage points. The most obvious is to collect and analyze the ancients' observations and traditions with regard to the various celestial bodies. This task was begun in the last century and is now well under way, forming a central concern of the burgeoning science of archaeoastronomy.

In addition to the information to be gained from simply compiling the ancient reports surrounding the respective planets, a second approach would be to investigate the traditions surrounding ancient gods identified with the various celestial bodies in the hope that some astronomical information might have been preserved therein. That the gods were early on identified with the respective planets is well-known, being apparent already at the dawn of history and ultimately coming to form a fundamental principle of Babylonian religion.

In Babylonian astronomical texts, for example, the planet Mars is routinely identified with the war-god Nergal. We will examine the cult of Nergal in great detail, arguing that it is impossible to understand the traditions surrounding this god apart from ancient conceptions surrounding the red planet. The cult of Nergal, in turn, will serve as a recurring point of comparison in our analyses of the war-gods of other cultures.

A third strategy, hitherto overlooked, would be to compare ancient reports surrounding the various planets with traditions involving heroes or heroines identified with them. Ancient beliefs surrounding the planet Mars, for example, might be compared with traditions surrounding Heracles, the identification of the Greek

strongman with the red planet being common in Hellenistic times. Here, too, it would appear that students of archaeoastronomy have overlooked a valuable source of information. Indeed, it was the vast nexus of characteristics shared in common between the planet Mars and Heracles which led me to postulate that the inspiration for the mythological traditions surrounding the Greek strongman was the primeval appearance and unique behavior of the red planet.¹

As the title attests, this book is fundamentally an exercise in comparative mythology. Our subject of study is the figure we have designated the “warrior-hero.” It can be shown that a vast corpus of myths surrounding this figure survives from virtually every corner of the globe, such traditions being traceable in the most ancient literature as well as in recently collected oral accounts. Many of these same myths are still with us today, forming prominent themes in modern cinema. Some will be familiar to our audience—those surrounding Heracles, Perseus, Odysseus, and Samson, for example. Others, such as the mythological traditions associated with the names Nergal, Indra, Thor, and Cuchulainn—although equally compelling—will perhaps be new to the reader.

It will be argued that many of the greatest mythical themes reflect ancient man’s obsession with the red planet. Indeed, we will attempt to show that Mars’ prominence in ancient consciousness is directly attributable to the extraordinary behavior of the red planet, which only recently participated in spectacular cataclysms involving the Earth and various neighboring planetary bodies. If our thesis has any validity, it follows that the orthodox version of the recent history of the solar system is itself little more than a modern “myth” and stands in dire need of revision. With implications this far-reaching, the ancient traditions surrounding the planet Mars suddenly take on new significance. We begin with the cycle of myths associated with Heracles.

HERACLES

The name of Heracles has conjured up images of strength and heroic valor for some 3,000 years, the fame of the Greek strongman being unrivaled by that of any

¹E. Cochrane, “Heracles and the Planet Mars,” *Aeon* I:4 (1988), pp. 89-106; *Idem*, “The Death of Heracles,” *Aeon* II:5 (1991), pp. 55-73.

other legendary figure. Countless attempts have been made to explain the hero's original significance, and yet it is fair to say that no consensus has been reached and a perplexing mystery remains.²

In this book we will offer a comprehensive theory of Heracles' mythology, one capable of accounting for the vast majority of the hero's characteristics and deeds. Ancient traditions involving Heracles, in turn, will serve as a common denominator as we survey the cults and myths of neighboring peoples. The figure of Heracles assumes this prominence in our study for several reasons. First, because more traditions came to surround the Greek strongman than any other ancient hero, and thus his cult offers the most complete portrait we have of the warrior-hero. And secondly, due to the great popularity of the hero and the Greek's propensity for travel and colonization, the Greek strongman became identified very early on with "barbarian" gods and heroes. [The cult of Heracles thus serves as a decisive link in comparative mythology. And thirdly, Heracles was identified with the planet Mars by the Greeks themselves.]

If we look at the earliest accounts of Heracles' career, we find that they typically describe a murderous rogue, in striking contrast to the valiant hero of later Greek legend and modern cinema. In the *Odyssey*, for example, Heracles is singled out for his treacherous betrayal of Iphitus, the latter renowned for his string of magnificent mares. It seems that Heracles had turned upon Iphitus despite the fact that he was a guest in the hero's house:

"That man called Heracles, privy to great deeds, who killed him in his household although he was a guest, that abominable man, he had no shame before the gods looking on nor for the table which he had prepared for him. And after he killed him, he himself kept the strong-footed horses in his palace."³

Of this passage, Galinsky remarked: "This is one of the most devastating indictments of Heracles in literature."⁴

²M. Bernal, in *Black Athena*, Vol. 2 (New Brunswick, 1991), p. 106, wrote as follows: "Herakles is a mythological figure of such massive richness and complexity that it is difficult to know how to disentangle the different strands that go to make him up."

³*Odyssey* 21:11-41

⁴G. Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme* (Oxford, 1972), p. 12.

The *Iliad* also condemns Heracles for his dark deeds. There the poet puts the following words into the goddess Dione's mouth: "O that hard violent man! that worker of evil! who distressed the Olympian gods with his arrows!"⁵

It is curious that our two earliest Greek sources represent Heracles in so dark a light—indeed as some great sinner against the gods. Nilsson, confronted with the image presented by the Homeric Heracles, was driven to observe: "This Heracles is the strongman relying solely on his strength...a reckless, violent character who proceeds to extremes, even to rivaling the gods and raising his weapons against them."⁶

The exact nature of Heracles' crime against the gods is something of a mystery. What does it mean that he "distressed the gods with his arrows?"

In the fifth chapter of the *Iliad* there is an allusion to an assault upon Olympus led by Heracles. The account is far from complete, yet one gains the impression that it offers a key to understanding the Greek strongman's mythological career. From the brief passage it is clear that it was Hades who suffered the brunt of Heracles' attack: "Hades the tremendous made the best of it, when that very same man...shot him in Pylos among the dead men, and the sharp arrow hurt him sorely."⁷

Other early Greek writers, such as Pindar, a poet who wrote in the fifth century BCE (c. 522-441), likewise alluded to the tradition of Heracles' attack upon Hades, albeit in passing.⁸ Pindar wrote that Hades could not hold his staff unshaken against the attack of Heracles.

Upon concluding his investigation of Heracles' mythology, Nilsson observed that the combat with Hades was the most ancient of the hero's deeds.⁹ Fontenrose arrived at much the same opinion: "The original and typical Heracles legend, reflected in every legend of the cycle, is the hero's combat with and victory over the death lord himself."¹⁰

⁵*Iliad* 5:392-404. Lattimore translates this passage as follows: "Brute, heavy-handed, who thought nothing of the bad he was doing, who with his archery hurt the gods that dwell on Olympos!"

⁶M. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (New York, 1932), p. 201.

⁷*Iliad* 5:394-398

⁸Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 9:29-35. See also the discussion in J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley, 1959), p. 328.

⁹M. P. Nilsson, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁰J. Fontenrose, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

HERACLES AND HELIOS

Hades was not the only Greek god said to have been humbled at the hands of Heracles. Helios is said to have suffered a similar assault. Stesichorus (c. 632 - 560 BCE) related that Heracles once threatened Helios with his bow in order to force the sun-god to lend him the god's ship-like cup.¹¹ Pherekydes and Panyasis (mythographers of the fifth century BCE) refer to the same tradition in their accounts of Heracles' career.¹² The testimony of these early writers—together with the popularity of Heracles' assault upon Helios in Greek art—attests to the great antiquity of this tradition. [See Diagram One]

How, then, are we to understand the confrontation of Heracles and Helios? Inasmuch as Helios is universally identified with the Sun, scholars have typically assumed that the myth is to be explained as some sort of nature allegory. Harrison, for example, proposed that the myth commemorated the daily rise and fall of the solar orb, an all-purpose explanation if ever there was one in mythological exegesis. In accordance with this interpretation Harrison concludes: "The young sun uprising shoots his arrows at the old setting sun."¹³

The problem with Harrison's explanation is that it leaves too many questions unanswered. What, for example, is the objective reference of the sun-god's cup? What is the significance of Heracles' status as an archer? If both Helios and Heracles are to be identified with the solar orb, how are we to understand a confrontation between the two? That Heracles should here be identified with some other celestial body seems more probable. The question is which one?

Turning to the Greek testimony on this matter, Eratosthenes and several other writers can be cited in favor of an identification of Heracles with the planet Mars.¹⁴ Such an identification was apparently fairly common in the Hellenistic Age, the

¹¹Stesichorus PMG 185:1. See also G. Galinsky, *op. cit.*, p. 20; and W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, 1979), pp. 83-84, 179-180.

¹²G. Galinsky, *op. cit.*, p. 25. See also O. Gruppe, "Herakles," *RE Supplement III* (Stuttgart, 1918), pp. 1061-1062.

¹³J. Harrison, "Helios-Hades," *The Classical Review* 22 (1908), p. 14.

¹⁴Scholia in Apollonius Rhodius III:1378; Pliny *NH* II:34; Hyginus, *Poetica Astronomica* II.42; Serv. *Aen.* VIII:275. See the discussion in W. Roscher, "Planeten," *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 2527. A. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen bei den indogermanischen Völkern* (Heidelberg, 1953), pp. 94-95.

astronomical writings of Petosiris attesting to the same opinion (second century BCE).¹⁵

Yet if Heracles is to be identified with Mars, how are we to understand an attack upon the sun-god by the planet Mars in astronomical terms? Under the current arrangement of the solar system, needless to say, circumstances under which the planet Mars would be seen as engaging in combat with the sun are difficult to imagine, inasmuch as the red planet is never particularly prominent or “threatening” while in close proximity to the solar orb. Indeed, being an outer planet, Mars can never appear in front of the Sun. When it does appear in the Sun’s vicinity, Mars is typically faint or invisible entirely. Nor are Mars and the Sun ever in the sky at the same time, Mars only appearing upon the descent of the Sun (except during an eclipse).¹⁶

Such astronomical realities notwithstanding, various ancient cultures left testimony which likewise brings the planet Mars into some sort of adversarial relationship with the ancient sun-god, a common motif ascribing to Mars a prominent role in eclipse-like phenomena. Astrological omens from ancient Babylon, for example, specifically mention Mars in connection with “eclipses” of the Sun. Consider the following omen: “If the Sun goes down (by a Darkness/Eclipse) and Mars stands in its place, there will be an Usurpator.”¹⁷ As a result of such reports, Gössmann concluded that “Mars [was] the star of the Darkness/Eclipse.”¹⁸

A tablet found in the royal library at Ugarit (KTU 1.78, conventionally dated to the second millennium BCE), alternately described as an “astronomical report” or “omen text,” likewise hints at strange goings on in the heavens involving the planet Mars. According to the consensus of leading scholars, the text speaks of the planet Mars in conjunction with an untimely going down of the sun.¹⁹ Sawyer and

¹⁵B. L. van der Waerden, *Science Awakening II: The Birth of Astronomy* (Leiden, 1974), p. 190.

¹⁶J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, “Literary and Astronomical Evidence for a Total Eclipse of the Sun Observed in Ancient Ugarit on 3 May 1375 B. C.,” *BSOAS* 33 (1970), pp. 468-469.

¹⁷P. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 82.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 132. Translation courtesy of Walter Morris.

¹⁹J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 467-489. See also the discussion in T. de Jong & W. van Soldt, “Redating an Early Solar Eclipse Record (KTU 1.78)...,” *Jaarbericht Ex Orient Lux* 30 (1987-88), pp. 65-77.

Stephenson, who were the first to see in the text an early description of a solar eclipse attended by Mars, offered the following translation:

“The Sun went down (in the day time) with Mars in attendance. (This means that) the overlord will be attacked by his vassals.”²⁰

Here the word translated as “Mars” is Reseph, a West Semitic god of war and pestilence. As the authors note, Reseph’s celestial identification seems secure in lieu of his well-attested identification with Nergal in Ugaritic texts.²¹ Although it would be rash to conclude from this sole Ugaritic omen that we have found a precise analogue to the Greek tradition of Heracles’ assault of Helios, it is certainly significant to find that Reseph was identified with Heracles in Hellenistic times.²²

As we will see, similar traditions are to be found throughout the ancient world, in the New World as well as the Old. Yet while these traditions appear to provide a measure of support for our identification of Heracles with Mars—at least in the myth of the confrontation with Helios—it nevertheless remains the case that under the current arrangement of the solar system circumstances under which the planet Mars might be envisaged as contributing to a disturbance of the sun are difficult to imagine. How, then, are we to account for such widespread traditions?

Several explanations present themselves. The simplest, of course, is to refer the various traditions linking Mars with ecliptic phenomena to scribal error, creative imagination, or astrological speculation. The ancients’ observational methods, for example, might be faulted. Or perhaps the confusion lies with erroneous interpretations on the part of more recent commentators.

An alternative explanation is to assume that the order of the solar system has only recently been established, and that in earlier times Mars was located such that it might be involved in disturbances of the Sun. This possibility was first entertained by

²⁰J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

²¹M. Dahood, “Ancient Semitic Deities in Syria and Palestine,” in S. Moscati ed., *Le Antiche Divinità Semitiche* (Rome, 1958), p. 84. W. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Reseph* (New Haven, 1976), p. 34-38.

²²W. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Reseph* (New Haven, 1976), p. 38. See also W. K. S., “Reschef,” *Reallexikon der Ägyptologie*, Vol. 4 (Berlin, 1977), p. 244.

Immanuel Velikovsky in *Worlds in Collision*,²³ and while it hardly seems a realistic alternative, it can be shown that the evidence does appear to point in this direction. It is our opinion, in fact, that the mythological confrontation of Heracles and Helios commemorates a former arrangement of the solar system, one radically different from the current one.

[Just how different can be seen upon considering the true identity of Helios. According to Plato, Diodorus, and other ancient authorities, Helios was originally a name for the planet Saturn!²⁴ Helios' identification with Saturn is so disconcerting at first sight that one is tempted to dismiss the Greek testimony without a second thought. Yet Wilamowitz, Boll, and other modern scholars have confirmed the accuracy of Diodorus' testimony, the understanding of the planet Saturn as an ancient sun-god of some sort being widespread in antiquity.²⁵

If the myth of Heracles' assault of Helios commemorates an assault of Saturn at the hands of Mars, it stands to reason that other cultures would have witnessed the same events.]

GILGAMESH

It has often been claimed that the mythology of Heracles stems from the ancient Near East. Certainly there can be no doubt that Oriental motifs found their way into the mythological cycle of the Greek hero.²⁶ The most obvious source of influence would appear to be the epic cycle of Gilgamesh, where striking parallels to the adventures of Heracles can be found. B.C. Brundage, for example, has observed:

“Gilgamesh...was—like Heracles—of mixed divine and mortal blood...Both Gilgamesh and Heracles are sexually prodigious, both wear pelts, both are mighty

²³I. Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1973), pp. 215-302. Although the identification of Heracles with the planet Mars was known to Velikovsky, it played no part in the reconstruction offered in that book.

²⁴*Epinomis* 987c; Diodorus 2:30:3; Hyginus 2:42. See also W. Roscher, “Planeten,” *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 2523-2526; D. Talbott, *The Saturn Myth* (New York, 1980), pp. 37-40; and D. Cardona, “Intimations of An Alien Sky,” *Aeon* 2:5 (1991), pp. 5-34.

²⁵U. von Wilamowitz-Mollendorff, “Phaethon,” *Hermes* 18 (1883), pp. 421-422; F. Boll, “Kronos-Helios,” *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* XIX (1916-1919); M. Jastrow, “Sun and Saturn,” *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archeologie Orientale* 7 (1909), pp. 163-178.

²⁶R. Brown, *Semitic Influence in Hellenic Mythology* (Clifton, 1966), pp. 97-100. See also W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 208-211; *The Orientalizing Revolution* (London, 1992), p. 113.

hunters, both are restless wanderers...In the tales of both heroes the theme of wrestling is a constant.”²⁷

Numerous other parallels might be adduced. Heracles’ combat with the Cretan bull recalls Gilgamesh’s combat with the heavenly bull. It was this particular “crime” which led Ishtar to curse the Sumerian hero, the bull being a favorite of the goddess—indeed a great god of some sort.²⁸ Heracles himself was cursed on more than one occasion in Greek tradition (in the aftermath of his murder of Theiodamas, and upon the slaughter of Syleus, for example).²⁹ Upon the island of Rhodes, moreover, the cursing of Heracles formed a central feature of the hero’s rites.³⁰

As Heracles was described as a murderous rogue of truculent spirit, Gilgamesh was recalled as an oppressive ruler, apparently because he had insisted upon exercising the *droit de seigneur*. Thus, in the first tablet of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, the hero is described as follows:

“The onslaught of his weapons has no equal...Gilgamesh leaves no son to his father; Day and night his outrageousness continues unrestrained...Gilgamesh leaves no virgin to her lover. The daughter of a warrior, the chosen of a noble. Their lament the gods heard over and over again.”³¹

The similarities between Huwawa and Shamash, coupled with the close correspondence acknowledged to exist between Gilgamesh and Heracles, raise the possibility that Gilgamesh’s combat with Huwawa is a Near Eastern analogue to the myth of Heracles and Helios. At the very least, the myth of Gilgamesh’s combat with Huwawa confirms that he—like Heracles—was intimately linked to some kind of assault against the gods in heaven. In light of our hypothesis that the mythology of Heracles commemorates ancient conceptions involving the planet Mars, the question arises as to whether Gilgamesh bears a relationship to the red planet as well?

MORTAL HERO OR PLANET-GOD?

²⁷B. C. Brundage, “Heracles the Levantine,” *JNES* 17:4 (1958), p. 209.

²⁸T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), pp. 95-96.

²⁹J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley, 1959), p. 196.

³⁰Apollodorus, II.5.11.8. See also L. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921), p. 156.

³¹A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1970), p. 18.

That there was a celestial dimension to the character of Gilgamesh has frequently been proposed, most recently by de Santillana and von Dechend in *Hamlet's Mill*. There the authors called attention to the numerous astral elements in the legendary cycle of Gilgamesh:

“It becomes evident that all the adventures of Gilgamesh, even if ever so earthily described, have no conceivable counterpart on earth. They are astronomically conceived from A to Z.”³²

In the early days of Near Eastern scholarship similar views prevailed, Gilgamesh generally being regarded as the prototypical example of a solar hero. Such was the opinion of Rawlinson, Jensen, Jeremias, and Jastrow, for example.³³ In accordance with this view, numerous theories were put forward comparing the hero's various adventures with the sun's “war against darkness,” or with the movement of the solar orb through the various signs of the zodiac.³⁴

In recent years, however, something of a consensus has developed that the mythology of Gilgamesh commemorates the deeds of a mortal king who ruled Sumer some five thousand years ago. This position has been defended by the likes of Kramer and Jacobsen, the former representing Gilgamesh as a king of the third millennium BCE, “whose deeds won him such wide renown that he became the supreme hero of Sumerian story and legend.”³⁵ Tigay offers a similar opinion in his assessment of the hero's origins: “The historical Gilgamesh was a king of Uruk during the Second Early Dynastic Period in Sumer (ca. 27-2500).”³⁶

Gilgamesh's confrontation with Huwawa, according to the proponents of this view, commemorates the forays of an early Sumerian king into the terrifying backwoods of Lebanon to obtain cedar-wood, the latter being necessary for the king's innovative building programs.³⁷ While it seems almost sacrilegious to argue against

³²G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1977), p. 323.

³³R. C. Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Oxford, 1930), p. 5.

³⁴R. Brown, *Semitic Influence in Hellenic Mythology* (Clifton, 1966), p. 170.

³⁵S. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite* (New York, 1969), p. 7. See also C. Gadd, “The Cities of Babylonia,” in *CAD*, Vol. 1:2 (Cambridge, 1971), p. 111.

³⁶J. Tigay, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

³⁷J. Gardner & J. Maier, *Gilgamesh* (New York, 1984), pp. 16, 106. J. Hansman, “Gilgamesh, Humbaba and the land of the Erin-Trees,” *Iraq* 38 (1976), pp. 25ff. See also N. Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 16; J. Tigay, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

the interpretations of such distinguished scholars as Kramer, Jacobsen, and Tigay, a more erroneous view is difficult to imagine. One might as well argue that the key to the traditions surrounding Heracles is to be sought for in the career of some early Greek ruler. Not so long ago, it will be remembered, Euhemeristic interpretations of Heracles' origins were common amongst Greek scholars as well, yet such interpretations have all but disappeared.

Pressed for evidence of Gilgamesh's mortal existence, Sumerologists point to the appearance of his name within various king-lists or his reputation as the builder of Uruk's great walls. Such traditions are of little historical import, however, as the names of gods and heroes are commonly found amongst the chronologies and king-lists of many ancient peoples.³⁸ Did not the Dorians claim Heracles as an early leader of flesh and blood?

Nor can any credence be given to Gilgamesh's association with the construction of the walls of Uruk, many ancient peoples ascribing cultural landmarks to the handiwork of gods and mythical heroes. Heracles too was credited with numerous engineering feats, one of the more intriguing of which was the construction of a sacred enclosure associated with Zeus/Kronos in order to establish the Olympic Games.³⁹ Note also that Gilgamesh's city had seven walls, as did Heracles' Thebes, a strong indication that the Uruk of Sumerian myth traces to the same cosmogonical scenario as the Cedar Mountain.⁴⁰

A Euhemeristic interpretation of Gilgamesh, quite frankly, is hopelessly inadequate as an explanation of this hero's mythology. On this score the work of Kramer, Jacobsen, and other modern scholars represents a significant step backwards from that of Jeremias, Jensen, Langdon, and other pioneers of Sumerology, all of whom were well aware of the celestial origins of ancient mythology. Yet while it is clear that the pioneers of Near Eastern studies were on the right track, it must be said that a solar interpretation of Gilgamesh cannot explain the traditions which came to

³⁸See the discussion in E. Cochrane, "Kadmos: Primeval King," *Kronos* XI:3 (Summer 1986), pp. 3-14.

³⁹Pindar *Olympian Odes* 10:45-50. See also R. Graves, *The Greek Myths* Vol. II (New York, 1970), p. 178. See also R. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

surround this hero. As was the case with Heracles, it is evident that some other celestial body lies behind the figure of Gilgamesh.

It was Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend who first raised the possibility that Gilgamesh might be connected with the planet Mars, calling attention to several characteristics shared by Gilgamesh and Nergal, the Akkadian god identified with the red planet.⁴¹ A god of war and pestilence, Nergal was invoked as the King of the Underworld.⁴² Yet as de Santillana and von Dechend point out, Gilgamesh was identified as a king of the underworld as early as Old Babylonian times (Ur III, c. 2500 BCE, according to Tigay).⁴³ The earliest reference to Gilgamesh, in fact, is to be found in a list of gods from Early Dynastic Fara, and it was as a god that Gilgamesh was celebrated in ancient ritual.⁴⁴ In later omen texts, Gilgamesh was invoked as judge of the underworld.⁴⁵ Indeed, one late text identifies the two figures: “Gilgamesh is Nergal, who resides in the underworld.”⁴⁶

A further clue in favor of the identification of Gilgamesh and Nergal is provided by their mutual association with the Mesu-tree, the latter being the Sumerian version of the World Tree, yet another variation upon the Cosmic Mountain theme. Both were invoked by the name *Meslamtae*, explained by Jacobsen as “he who issues forth from the Mesu tree.”⁴⁷ This tree was celebrated as follows in *The Poem of Erra*:

“Where is the Mesu tree, the flesh of the gods, the ornament of the king of the universe? That pure tree...whose roots reached as deep down as the bottom of the underworld...whose top reached as high as the sky of Anum?”⁴⁸

⁴⁰See G. S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (New York, 1982), p. 182. Note also that seven walls were said to surround the Underworld. See K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 391.

⁴¹G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *op. cit.*, pp. 448-449. It should be noted that these scholars ultimately rejected this identification, however.

⁴²K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 391.

⁴³G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *op. cit.*, pp. 448-449.

⁴⁴W. Lambert, “Gilgames in religious, historical and omen texts and the historicity of Gilgames,” in *Gilgames et sa légende*, ed. by P. Garelli, (Paris, 1960), p. 48. Gilgamesh is also designated as a god in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. See A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1970), p. 47.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 42-46. See also J. Tigay, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁶W. Lambert, *op. cit.*, p. 39. See also G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 449.

⁴⁷K. Tallqvist, *op. cit.*, p. 374; T. Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, p. 17. Nergal is elsewhere referred to as “the poplar of Gilgamesh.” See M. Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology* (Cincinnati, 1981), p. 93.

⁴⁸L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (Malibu, 1977), p. 32.

Granted the possibility that Gilgamesh and Nergal represent one and the same ancient god/hero, and granted that the former is acknowledged to offer a close parallel to Heracles, one wonders about the possibility of a relationship between the Greek hero and Nergal?

Nergal's identification with the Greek strongman has only recently come to light, being first documented by H. Seyrig, who drew attention to various features shared by the two gods in ancient iconography.⁴⁹ According to Seyrig, the identity of the two gods was an ancient and widely held doctrine, and joint cults to Heracles-Nergal have been found at Hatra, Palmyra, and elsewhere.⁵⁰

Inasmuch as the figure of Nergal will play a pivotal role in our analysis of ancient myth, it is imperative that we devote a few pages to his cult.

NERGAL

Nergal is best known, perhaps, by virtue of his mention in the Old Testament.⁵¹ The chief god of Kutha, a city in southern Babylonia, Nergal's cult can be traced throughout the wide range of Akkadian influence, from Mari to Babylon to Sumer.⁵² The god's cult is attested in early Sumerian texts and remained strong even in late Babylonian and Persian times, a period spanning well over two thousand years.⁵³

In the past century a wealth of evidence has come to light regarding the nature of this god. Nergal was first and foremost a god of war, the god's name frequently being employed as a synonym for war.⁵⁴ Countless hymns attest to the god's prowess as a warrior. The following hymn is typical:

⁴⁹H. Seyrig, "Antiquites Syriennes," *Syria* 64 (1944-1945), pp. 62-80. Nergal is depicted equipped with club and bow, for example. See here M. Schretter, *Alter Orient und Hellas* (Innsbruck, 1974), p. 171.

⁵⁰H. Seyrig, *op. cit.*, p. 71. See also W. Al-Salihi, "Hercules-Nergal at Hatra," *Iraq* 33 (1971), pp. 113-115; V. Christides, "Heracles-Nergal in Hatra," *Berytus* 30 (1982), pp. 105-115; J. Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra* (Leiden, 1979), pp. 112-113. M. Schretter has gone so far as to suggest that the name of Heracles traces to the cult of Nergal: "In the name Heracles the Nergal-name Eragal is to be seen." M. Schretter, *op. cit.*, p. 170. This hypothesis, as Burkert has noted, seems most unlikely.

⁵¹*II Kings* 17:30

⁵²E. Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), pp. 25, 37.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 70.

“Warrior! Raging storm-tide, who flattens the lands in upheaval, Warrior! Lord of the Underworld...Raging storm-tide, who has no rival, Who wields the weapon, who raises the troops.”⁵⁵

Inscriptions of Hammurabi, Naram-Sin, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal invoke the god’s aid in battle. Witness the following passage from the epilogue of Hammurabi’s Law Code: “May Nergal, the strong one among the gods, the fighter without peer, who achieves victory for me, burn his [i.e., the enemy’s] people in his great power, like the raging fire of swamp-reeds!”⁵⁶ Hammurabi elsewhere seeks Nergal’s aid in fulfilling curses:

“May Nergal, mighty amongst the gods, the warrior whom none can resist, who has fulfilled my eager desire, by his great power consume his people like a fire raging amongst the rushes, may he cleave him asunder with his mighty weapon and shatter his limbs as of a statue of clay.”⁵⁷

According to one hymn, Nergal’s belligerent nature knew no bounds, extending to the domain of the gods as well:

“O warrior, splendid one...Mighty of arms, broad of chest, perfect one without rival among all the gods, Who grasps the pitiless deluge-weapon, who massacres the enemy, Lion clad in splendor, at the flaring-up of whose fierce brilliance, The gods of the inhabited world took to secret places...”⁵⁸

As we have seen, in addition to his function as a god of war and pestilence, Nergal also appears as a god of the underworld.⁵⁹ Indeed the god’s name confirms as much, signifying “lord of the underworld.”⁶⁰ An early Assyrian text, entitled *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, tells of Nergal’s usurpation of the throne of the underworld at the expense of Ereshkigal.⁶¹

⁵⁵J. Curtis, “An Investigation of the Mount of Olives in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition,” *HUCA* 28 (1957), p. 156.

⁵⁶W. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Resep* (New Haven, 1976), p. 37.

⁵⁷E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 100.

⁵⁸B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 622.

⁵⁹T. Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once...* (New Haven, 1987), p. 170.

⁶⁰E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 4. See also W. Lambert, “Studies in Nergal,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 30:5/6 (1973), p. 356.

⁶¹For a discussion of this document see O. Gurney & J. Finkelstein, *The Sultantepe Tablets* (London, 1957).

Throughout the various ancient texts pertaining to Nergal, the dominant image is of a bloodthirsty god hell-bent on promoting war, destruction, death, and pestilence. Jastrow summarized the god's cult as follows:

"He is associated with pestilence, famine, and the grave...he is assigned to a position at the head of a special pantheon of the lower world where the dead dwell. His city, Cutha, becomes a poetical designation for the great gathering place of the dead, and his name is explained, perhaps fancifully, as 'lord of the great dwelling,' that is, the grave...The various names assigned to him, almost without exception, emphasize this forbidding phase of his nature, and the myths associated with him deal with destruction, pestilence, and death. Naturally, Nergal is also pictured as a god of war, bringing about the results for which he would be held responsible."⁶²

In the astral religion of ancient Mesopotamia, Nergal was early on identified with the planet Mars. According to von Weiher, the identification of Nergal with the red planet traces to Old-Babylonian times and is apparent in all periods of the god's cult.⁶³ The following hymn from Uruk is typical in this respect:

"[O Nergal], warrior of the gods, who possesses the lofty strength of Anu, [Lion] with gaping maw, marauding lion monster, who takes his place nobly in the height of heaven, [Who holds] lordship, whose features ever glow in heaven...[O Nergal, warrior] of the gods, long of arms, whose divine splendor is sublime in heaven, [Star] ever shining, sublime of features."⁶⁴

Nergal's association with an assault upon the gods, together with his identification with the planet Mars, offers a striking parallel to the traditions surrounding Heracles.

ORIGINS OF THE LATIN GOD MARS

There have been a handful of noteworthy attempts to explain the origins of the Latin god Mars. The first systematic treatment was that of Wilhelm Roscher, who approached the subject from the vantage point of comparative mythology, calling attention to the striking similarities which pertain between Mars and the Greek

⁶²M. Jastrow, *Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice in Babylonia and Assyria* (New York, 1971), pp. 107-108.

⁶³E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁶⁴B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 626.

Apollo.⁶⁵ Believing that Apollo personified the sun, Roscher argued that Mars was likewise originally a sun-god, an opinion which can be found already in Macrobius.⁶⁶ Although consistent with the scholarship of the time, Roscher's solar-interpretation has since been abandoned.

Other scholars, such as Mannhardt, Frazer, and Rose noted the intimate relationship between Mars and the phenomena of fertility, and sought to make of him a god of vegetation or Master of Animals.⁶⁷ Mars' invocation by the Fratres Arvales to defend the grain from pestilence, and Cato's prayer imploring the god's aid in securing the harvest are frequently cited here.⁶⁸ The October horse sacrifice dedicated to Mars, in accordance with this view, was interpreted as commemorating the death of the "corn-demon," thereby insuring a prosperous harvest.⁶⁹ The bizarre ritual associated with the name of Mamurius Veturius, in which the "Old Mars" was driven from the city amidst blows and jeers, was seen as proof that Mars represented the Old Year or a dying god of vegetation.⁷⁰ Mars' identification with the wolf and/or woodpecker, finally, was viewed as a clear indication that the god was originally a Master of Animals or a Lord of Beasts.⁷¹

A host of other scholars, most notably Wissowa and Dumezil, argued that Mars was originally a god of war and that the other facets of the god's cult were simply developments of this one fundamental idea.⁷² Here emphasis was placed upon the god's role in defending the borders and leading the battle-charge. That Mars bore an intimate relation to the phenomena of war is contested by no one. Numerous epithets

⁶⁵W. Roscher, *Studien zur vergleichenden Mythologie der griechen und romer: Apollon und Mars* (Leipzig, 1873). Roscher was able to show, for example, that both gods were intimately associated with oracles, pestilence, and war; symbolized by swords; identified with certain trees and/or animals (especially the wolf); intimately associated with New Year rites; represented as the founders of numerous cities (*archegetai*); etc.

⁶⁶*Saturnalia*, 19:1-4.

⁶⁷W. Mannhardt, *Mythologische Forschungen* (Strassburg, 1884); H. Rose, *Some Problems of Classical Religion* (Oslo, 1958), pp. 1-17.

⁶⁸Cato, *De agri cultura* 141.

⁶⁹J. Frazer, *The Scapegoat* (London, 1913), p. 230. Compare here the opinion of H. Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-7.

⁷⁰Joannes Lydus, *De mensibus* 3:29; 4:36-49. See the extensive discussion in J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-252. See also G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1970), p. 214.

⁷¹H. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

reveal the god's bellicose nature: *Gradivus*, *Victor*, *Militarus*, *Saevus*, *Caeco*, etc.⁷³ War itself was frequently designated by the god's name. Dumezil summarized his extensive discussion of the cult of Mars as follows: "From whatever side one views the problem, whether at Rome, or at Iguvium, or in Etruria, a strict checking of the arguments leaves Mars in his traditional role as warrior god and god of the warriors."⁷⁴

Wagenvoort and Hermansen, finally, called attention to the chthonic elements in Mars' cult.⁷⁵ As Wagenvoort points out, Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* attests to the belief that the entrance to the underworld was located on the Campus Martius.⁷⁶ Wagenvoort also documented a series of parallels between Mars and Consus, the latter being an archaic god of the underworld. Acknowledging that by the time of our extant sources Mars' sphere of activity had become largely confined to the functions of war and defense, Wagenvoort argued that the god's association with death and fertility was nonetheless primary: "Originally a god of fertility, of death and the underworld, he at length had his range of activity narrowed down to war."⁷⁷

Summing up our survey thus far, it is fair to say that the cult of Mars has proven to be no easy nut to crack. Leading authorities on ancient Roman religion have arrived at diametrically opposed opinions upon reviewing the same evidence. Inasmuch as a consensus has yet to be reached regarding the god's original nature and sphere of influence, perhaps the time has come for a new approach to the problem.

With the notable exceptions of Roscher and Dumezil, most of the scholars investigating the cult of Mars have relied on the extant Latin records to make their case. This is all well and good, provided that such records are sufficiently extensive to determine the issue. It is well-known, however, that the Latin testimony with

⁷²G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (München, 1912), pp. 143ff. G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1970).

⁷³W. Roscher, "Mars," *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 2424. U. Scholz, *Studien zum altitalischen und altrömischen Marskult und fMarsmythos* (Heidelberg, 1970), p. 45.

⁷⁴G. Dumezil, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

⁷⁵H. Wagenvoort, "The Origin of the Ludi Saeculares," in *Studies in Roman Literature, Culture and Religion* (New York, 1978), pp. 193-232; G. Hermansen, *Studien über den italischen und den römischen Mars* (Kopenhagen, 1940).

⁷⁶H. Wagenvoort, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

regards to the origins of their religious practices is both late and relatively meager and thus it is possible that the various theories of Mars' origins reflect late and possibly idiosyncratic aspects of the god's cult. Rosivach's observation upon concluding his interpretation of Mars' cult is most relevant here: "Inevitably any discussion of primitive Roman religion must be to some degree speculative since we have so little evidence of that religion as it was before it was tainted by the *interpretatio graeca*."⁷⁸

A possible antidote to this situation, in my opinion, is offered by the comparative approach pioneered by Roscher and refined by Dumézil. For example, in order to distinguish between the archetypal and derivative elements in the cult of Mars one might compare the Latin god with war-gods of other Indo-European peoples. Any correspondences which turn up would presumably belong to the most archaic layers of the god's cult, tracing to the time before the respective Indo-European cultures diverged and went their separate ways. Employing this strategy Dumézil was able to cite several intriguing parallels between the cult of Latin Mars and Indra, the great war-god of Vedic India.⁷⁹ Inasmuch as he was primarily interested in Indo-European institutions, Dumézil essentially ignored the wealth of evidence bearing on the cult of the war-god from the ancient Near East where, it can be shown, the Akkadian war-god Nergal offers a remarkable analogue to the Latin god.

NERGAL

Nergal, as we have seen, is first and foremost a god of war. As was the case with the Latin Mars, the name "Nergal" was frequently employed as a synonym for war.⁸⁰ Countless hymns attest to the god's preoccupation with the phenomena of war:

"Warrior! Raging storm-tide, who flattens the lands in upheaval, Warrior! Lord of the Underworld...Raging storm-tide, who has no rival, Who wields the weapon, who raises the troops."⁸¹

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁷⁸V. Rosivach, "Mars, the Lustral God," *Latomus* 42 (1983), p. 521.

⁷⁹Thus Dumézil was able to show that the Latin rite of the horse-sacrifice has a close homologue in the Indian horse-sacrifice called *asvamedha*. See *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1970), pp. 224-228.

⁸⁰E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 70. The same is true of the Greek Ares, of course.

In addition to his function as a god of war and pestilence, Nergal also appears as a god of the underworld.⁸² As we have seen, the god's name confirms as much, signifying "lord of the underworld."⁸³

Even from this brief survey the resemblance between the Akkadian Nergal and Latin Mars is apparent. It is upon closer examination, however, that the fundamental affinity of the two gods becomes obvious.

The oldest cult image of Mars, according to Varro and Plutarch, was an upright lance.⁸⁴ Indeed there are numerous indications that the lance was addressed as the god himself.⁸⁵ One of the oldest images of Nergal, similarly, was a sword, a frequent epithet of the god being *namsaru*, "sword," signifying the "sword-god."⁸⁶

That Nergal, like Mars, also bore an agrarian aspect has long been recognized by scholars.⁸⁷ In a Sumerian prayer to Nergal, for example, the god is implored to permit "the land to become green."⁸⁸ Nergal is elsewhere invoked as the agent who "increases the green."⁸⁹ Other epithets identifying Nergal with various species of tree (Mulberry, Date-Palm, Tamarisk, among others) point in the same direction, perhaps.⁹⁰ Here one is reminded of Mars' identification with the laurel tree. Also relevant is Mars' epithet *Silvanus*, the latter being an early Latin god of the fields and forest.⁹¹

⁸¹J. Curtis, "An Investigation of the Mount of Olives in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition," *HUCA* 28 (1957), p. 156.

⁸²T. Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once...* (New Haven, 1987), p. 170.

⁸³E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 4. See also W. Lambert, "Studies in Nergal," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 30:5/6 (1973), p. 356.

⁸⁴Livy 24:10

⁸⁵W. Roscher, "Mars," *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechische und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 2422.

⁸⁶E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 41. See also the discussion in J. Bollenrucher, *Gebete und Hymnen an Nergal* (Leipzig, 1904), p. 8.

⁸⁷H. Seyrig, "Antiquites Syriennes," *Syria* 64 (1944-1945), pp. 71-72. J. Curtis, "An Investigation of the Mount of Olives in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition," *HUCA* 28 (1957), pp. 151-155. J. Bollenrucher, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁸⁸J. Curtis, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 390.

⁹¹Cato, *De Re Rust.* 83. See here the discussion in W. Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* (London, 1890), pp. 825-826.

Nergal's intimate association with pestilence likewise finds a curious reminiscence in the cult of the Latin Mars. Thus an early epithet of Mars was *Isminthians*, the latter word signifying a god who sends but also averts plagues of mice.⁹² As this epithet suggests, Mars possessed an apotropaic aspect, readily apparent in the prayer of the Arval Brethren—"Let not plague and destruction attack the many, O Mars"—and abundantly confirmed elsewhere by such epithets as *Averrunchus*.

A similar ambivalence distinguishes the cult of Nergal, to whom prayers were offered to aid in warding off the ravages of pestilence and plague.⁹³ Indeed, this practice of invoking a god of pestilence for apotropaic purposes was widespread in the ancient Near East, as Albright observed: "The god who brought death through disease was also best fitted to heal the ills which he had inflicted."⁹⁴ By a similar logic, the *Poem of Erra* came to be employed as an amulet against plague and pestilence.⁹⁵

Nergal's status as god of the underworld, while it fails to find a precise analogue in the cult of the Latin god, recalls Wagenvoort's interpretation of Mars as a chthonic deity. In addition to the evidence cited by Wagenvoort, Mars' chthonic connections are also indicated by his well-known function as a god of oracles.⁹⁶ Near Reate, for example, there was an ancient oracle of Mars in which the god is said to have prophesied in the form of a woodpecker.⁹⁷ Here, too, it would appear, there is a certain parallel with the cult of Nergal, who appears among a list of oracle gods in a text dating to the reign of Nabonidus.⁹⁸

Mention must be made, finally, of Nergal's identification with the planet Mars in Babylonian astronomical texts.⁹⁹ That this characteristic likewise finds a precise parallel in the case of the Latin Mars is obvious.

⁹²H. Wagenvoort, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

⁹³E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 22.

⁹⁴Quoted in M. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1967), p. 313.

⁹⁵E. Reiner, "More Fragments of the Epic of Erra: A Review Article," *JNES* 17 (1958), p. 46.

⁹⁶W. Roscher, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

⁹⁷Dionysus I:41.

⁹⁸E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 102.

⁹⁹E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-83. See also M. Jastrow, *Religious Belief in Babylonia and Assyria* (New York, 1911), p. 108.

In summary, the analogous nature of the cults of Nergal and Mars would appear to be self-evident. Both gods are intimately associated with the phenomena of war, being explicitly identified with swords. Both betray an agrarian aspect and are identified with trees. Both were associated with the onset and warding off of pestilence. Chthonic elements are discernible in the cults of both gods as well, although here it must be admitted that they are more prominent in the cult of Nergal than in that of Mars. And both Mars and Nergal, finally, are expressly identified with the same celestial body.

MARS, NERGAL, AND HERACLES

Comparative mythology can also be brought to bear in support of the fundamental affinity of Mars and Nergal. A case in point is their mutual identification with Heracles. Nergal's identification with the Greek strongman, as we have seen, is securely attested. So, too, is the identification of the Greek hero with the Latin god Mars, being reported by Macrobius and Servius.¹⁰⁰ The basis for this identification, however, is not reported in the extant sources. Indeed, at first sight Heracles and Mars would appear to share but little in common. How then are we to account for their identification? The ultimate basis of this equation, in our opinion, is the simple fact that Heracles and Mars both ultimately trace to the planet Mars.

THE PLANET MARS

The modern name for the red planet, of course, derives from the cult of the Latin war god. According to conventional scholarship, the Latin Mars originally bore no relation to the planetary body, the red planet being arbitrarily assigned the name of the Latin god through assimilation to Ares. It is our opinion, however, that modern scholars have been unwise to overlook the Latin god's connection with the red planet.

Having documented the fundamental affinity which exists between Nergal and Mars, the question arises as to the basis of that affinity? Several explanations suggest themselves. The first possibility assumes a direct transmission between the two cults, the original settlers of Italy—the various tribes of which each appear to have carried the cult of Mars with them—at some point falling under the influence of the Semitic

worshippers of Nergal. While there is a modicum of evidence for Semitic influence on early Italian culture—witness the well-known similarity between Etruscan and Babylonian rites of hepatoscopy—this scenario seems unlikely.¹⁰¹

An alternative scenario provides that there was an indirect relationship between the cults of Nergal and Mars via the mediation of a third culture. It has long been known, for example, that the cult of the Greek god Ares shares numerous features in common with that of Mars.¹⁰² Ares too personified the furor of war¹⁰³; was symbolized by an upright sword¹⁰⁴; invoked as an agent of pestilence and death¹⁰⁵; and identified with the planet Mars.¹⁰⁶ Significantly, both Ares and Mars were offered the wolf as sacrifice, a relatively rare animal in sacrificial rites among Indo-European peoples.¹⁰⁷ Is it possible, then, that Greece provided the means for diffusion of the Akkadian cult of Nergal?

The close resemblance between Ares and Mars notwithstanding, it must be said that there is no more evidence of a cultural indebtedness between the worshippers of Ares and Nergal than there is between those of Mars and Nergal. Thus it is most unlikely that Greece served as an intermediary for a possible influence of Nergal's cult upon that of the Latin Mars. It is generally agreed by scholars of Latin religion, moreover, that the Greek cult of Ares had relatively little influence upon the fundamental features of the cult of Mars.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰Macrobius 3:12:6; Servius *Aen.* 8:275. See also O. Gruppe, "Herakles," *RE Supplement III* (Stuttgart, 1918), col. 1103.

¹⁰¹Certain loan words from Akkadian also appear in Latin texts. Here the word *marra*, "hoe," is a case in point (it would appear to derive ultimately from the Sumerian *marru*). That this word is ultimately cognate with the root *mar*—the root from whence comes Mars—is likely.

¹⁰²G. Dumézil, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

¹⁰³L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. V (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 401. See also J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 1 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 203.

¹⁰⁴On the god's identification with a sword, see Herodotus 4:60-65. See also the discussion in O. Gruppe, *Griechische Mythologie* (New York, 1975), p. 1382.

¹⁰⁵On the god's association with pestilence, see Aeschylus *Suppliants* 678-685. See also A. Furtwangler, "Ares," *RLM* Vol. I (Hildesheim, 1965), pp. 486-487.

¹⁰⁶*Epinomis* 987c. See also F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans* (New York, 1912), p. 27.

¹⁰⁷L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. III (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 400.

¹⁰⁸G. Hermansen, *Studien über den italischen und den römischen Mars* (Copenhagen, 1940), p. 24. For a contrary opinion see U. Scholz, *Studien zum altitalischen und altrömischen Marskult und Marsmythos* (Heidelberg, 1970), p. 44.

A third possibility is that the respective cults of Mars, Nergal, and Ares each reflect ancient beliefs associated with the planet Mars. This conclusion is supported by the observation that the very same nexus of motifs—war, sword, pestilence, underworld, etc.—surround the planet Mars throughout the ancient world, even in cultures where a Babylonian influence would appear to be ruled out (i.e., in the New World). Under this interpretation one would grant that although Babylonian astronomical conceptions exerted a significant influence over several of the greatest cultures of the ancient world—Greece, India, and China, for example—the principal basis for the common features shared between the cults of Mars, Nergal, and Ares is to be found in ancient conceptions associated with the planet Mars, the latter of which, in the final analysis, are attributable to the appearance and behavior of the red planet. Inasmuch as such phenomena would have been witnessed by people the world over, the similarity of the cults of ancient Mars-gods is accounted for.

The possibility that the cult of Mars traces to the planet of that name has never been seriously considered, to the best of my knowledge. Neither, for that matter, has the similarity of the Mars-cult to that of Nergal been recognized.

The thesis defended here maintains that the fundamental motifs characterizing the cult of the Latin war-god trace to ancient conceptions associated with the planet Mars. Such conceptions arose long before the beginnings of formal astronomy in Babylon and thus predate the founding of Rome by centuries if not entire millennia. Common elements in the cults of Mars, Nergal, and Ares, consequently, need not reflect diffusion from a common cultural source—rather, common observations of the planet Mars.

An interesting result of our research is that it lends a measure of support to each of the aforementioned interpretations of Mars and thus points the way to a possible synthesis with regards to the origins of the god's cult. The Latin god was certainly intimately associated with the phenomena of war (Dumezil and Wissowa); the god does indeed bear an agrarian aspect (Rose, Frazer); it is probable—based on the cult of Nergal, but also with regard to certain features in the cult of the Latin god—that Mars was also a god of the underworld (Wagenvoort, Hermansen); and Mars does indeed trace to a celestial body (Roscher). Each and every one of these functions, in

our opinion, is intimately associated with the god's planetary identification and thus cannot be fully understood apart from this identification.

APOLLO

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche developed the aesthetic dialectic of the Apollinian and the Dionysian, concepts which were to leave an indelible imprint on our culture. For Nietzsche the Apollinian force symbolized all that was light, harmonious, rational, and orderly, the form-giving force apparent in the best of Greek architecture and sculpture. The Dionysian force, in contrast, represented that which was dark and wild; epitomized best, perhaps, by the reckless abandon and mystic ecstasy of the Dionysian rites described in Euripedes' *Bacchae*.

The modern conception of Apollo—including scholarly research into the origins of the god's cult—has been much influenced by Nietzsche's analysis. Witness the following assessment of Apollo's cult by Jane Harrison: "Apollo has more in him of the Sun and the day, of order and light and reason."¹⁰⁹ W.K. Guthrie offers a similar opinion in *The Greeks and Their Gods*:

"He is the very embodiment of the Hellenic spirit. Everything that marks off the Greek outlook from that of other peoples, and in particular from the barbarians who surrounded them—beauty of every sort, whether of art, music, poetry or youth, sanity and moderation—are all summed up in Apollo."¹¹⁰

From such statements, one would assume that Apollo generally bore a positive reputation among the ancient Greeks. Yet this is far from true. The further back in time that one traces the cult of Apollo, a completely different picture begins to emerge—that of a god devoted to bringing pestilence and plague, delighting in the ravages of war.¹¹¹

That the *Iliad* generally depicts Apollo in an unfavorable light is well-known. Apollo is represented as the leading god of the Trojans, after all. Homer's Apollo is preeminently a god of plague and pestilence, and one of the poet's favorite epithets of Apollo—*hekebolos*—"the far-shooter," is thought to refer to Apollo's propensity for

¹⁰⁹J. Harrison, *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion & Themis* (New York, 1962), p. 443.

¹¹⁰W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston, 1966), p. 73.

¹¹¹See here the discussion of J. Solomon in K. Kerényi, *Apollo* (Dallas, 1983), pp. 63-67.

causing plague with his “arrows.” The following passage from the *Iliad* is representative of the archaic Apollo, being in fact the first Apollonian epiphany in Greek literature:

“Down he strode, wroth at heart, bearing on his shoulders his bow and covered quiver. The arrows rattled on the shoulders of the angry god as he moved; and his coming was like the night. Then he sat down apart from the ships and let fly a shaft; terrible was the twang of his silver bow. The mules he assailed first and the swift dogs, but thereafter on the men themselves he let fly his stinging arrows, and smote; and ever did the pyres of the dead burn thick.”¹¹²

It is the plague-bringing Apollo, in fact, whom Homer blames for the outbreak of the Trojan War.¹¹³

Apollo’s darker nature can also be glimpsed in the *Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo*. There a curious passage hints of an assault upon Olympus, during which Apollo is said to have once caused the gods to tremble and jump from their seats:

“I will remember and not be unmindful of Apollo who shoots afar. As he goes through the house of Zeus, the gods tremble before him and all spring up from their seats when he draws near, as he bends his bright bow.”¹¹⁴

There the god is ascribed a haughty nature: “They say that Apollo will be one that is very haughty and will greatly lord it among gods and men all over the fruitful earth.”¹¹⁵ It is in this light, perhaps, that we are to understand the report of Aeschylus that Apollo was exiled from heaven, presumably because of his offenses against the gods.¹¹⁶

As our earliest Greek source, Homer’s testimony is especially valuable in reconstructing Apollo’s original nature and cult. And while the nature of Apollo’s crimes are only hinted at by Homer, Aeschylus, and the author of the *Homeric*

¹¹² *Iliad* I:44ff.

¹¹³ *Iliad* I:8-10.

¹¹⁴ *Hymn to Delian Apollo*, 1-5ff. Quoted from *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homeric* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 325.

¹¹⁵ III:65-70

¹¹⁶ *Suppliants* 214. See also L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 141.

Hymns, it is clear nonetheless that the archaic Apollo was hardly the god of light and order described by modern scholars.

FROM WHENCE APOLLO?

Apollo's origins remain a mystery. Here Guthrie has observed: "His original nature cannot be discussed with profit, since it is too deeply wrapped in obscurity."¹¹⁷ Strutynski concedes that Apollo is "particularly difficult to categorize," lamenting that there are apparently at least a handful of different gods by this name.¹¹⁸ Faraone, in a recent and most provocative discussion of the god's cult, offered the following opinion: "Apollo is a multivalent and polymorphic deity who has to my mind successfully resisted any all-encompassing description or label."¹¹⁹ Inasmuch as we will here be offering a comprehensive theory of Apollo's origins and cult—one capable of explaining the vast majority of the god's characteristic features—a brief summary of the god's cult is in order.

The depth of the mystery surrounding Apollo is complicated by the inability of scholars to agree upon the meaning of his name. With Aeschylus, several scholars have proposed a derivation from *ollynai*, a Greek word meaning "to destroy." Such a derivation would appear perfectly appropriate for the god of war, pestilence, and plague described by Homer, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, yet modern scholars regard it as unlikely on linguistic grounds.¹²⁰

To those scholars who viewed Apollo as a god of light and culture, this etymology did not sit well. W. Max Muller, for example, a pioneer of the solar school of mythology and firm believer in the solar nature of Apollo, offered the following objection:

"The ancients derived Apollon from apoll-yni in the sense of destroyer...Phonetically there is nothing to be said against it. But we cannot decide on an etymology by means of phonetic laws only. The meaning also has a right to be considered. Now we have no right to say that from the beginning Apollon was a destructive god."¹²¹

¹¹⁷W. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹¹⁸U. Strutynski, "Ares: A Reflex of the Indo-European War God?," *Arethusa* 13 (1980), p. 217.

¹¹⁹C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), p. 126.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹²¹Quoted in R. Brown, *Semitic Influence in Hellenic Mythology* (Clifton, 1966), p. 17.

With this declaration the clear testimony of Homer and Aeschylus was thrust aside, and Muller proceeded to derive Apollo from a Sanskrit form **Apa-var-yan*, meaning “the Opener,” a reference to the sun’s role in opening the gates of heaven.¹²² Needless to say, it would be difficult to find a single supporter of Muller’s etymology today. Nor is there any evidence that the aboriginal Apollo was related to the Sun, as we will see.

Other scholars point to a relationship between Apollo and the archaic word *apellai*, signifying an assembly of some sort. This view has been championed by Burkert, among others: “The name in the earlier, pre-Homeric form is scarcely to be separated from the institution of the *apellai*, annual gatherings of the tribal or phratry organization such as are attested in Delphi and Laconia, and which, from the month name Apellaios, can be inferred for the entire Dorian-northwest Greek area.”¹²³

[Gershenson offers yet another derivation: “Apollo’s name has been derived most plausibly from the Indo-European **apelo-*, **aplo-*, common to Greek, Illyrian, and Germanic (ON *afl*, ‘strength’) and meaning ‘strength,’ or ‘power.’”¹²⁴]

Scholars are also divided on the question of Apollo’s original homeland. The two leading theories are those which trace the god’s cult to the North and, alternately, to Asia Minor. The proponents of the northern hypothesis cite as a decisive clue the intimate relation of Apollo to the Hyperboreans—“those who dwell beyond the North Wind.”¹²⁵ From these hypothetical Hyperborean origins, scholars assume a transmission of Apollo’s cult to mainland Greece via one of the early migrations, that of the Dorians for example.¹²⁶

Those who seek the god’s original homeland in the Near East, on the other hand, can point to the antiquity and prevalence of Apollo’s cult in Asia Minor.¹²⁷ Apollo was especially revered in Lycia and Caria, for example, sites of the famous temples at

¹²²*Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹²³W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1985), p. 144.

¹²⁴D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god* (McLean, Virginia, 1991), p. 127.

¹²⁵A leading proponent of the Northern Apollo was R. Harris, “Apollo at the back of the North Wind,” *JHS* 45 (1925), pp. 229-242. There (p. 233), Harris refers to a “consensus of opinion” that “Apollo is not a Greek god at all, but a Northern migration or importation.”

¹²⁶W. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹²⁷G. S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (New York, 1974), p. 257; L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

Didyma and Klaros.¹²⁸ Faraone recently reviewed the controversy surrounding the god's original homeland:

“Since Wilamowitz, scholars have searched high and low for an ‘Asiatic’ or ‘oriental’ origin for Apollo, whose favorite number (seven), strong pro-Trojan sympathies in the *Iliad*, and odd manifestations (for example, *Smintheus*) seemed to be alien to Hellenic sensibilities. As is the case with the early depictions of Heracles, Apollo's bow has also caused suspicion, because although it is a royal weapon of great prestige in Egypt, the Near East, and native Anatolian cultures, it seems to have been snubbed by the Greeks from the start as a somewhat unheroic weapon efficient for neither hunting nor warfare.”¹²⁹

Indeed, if one were looking for parallels to the Iliadic god of pestilence, the ancient Near East would seem a good place to start, Reseph, Erra, and Nergal each offering striking parallels to Homer's Apollo.

RESEPH

Reseph, like Apollo, was notorious for his “plague-bringing” arrows, and in early Syrian and Egyptian iconography he is depicted with quiver and arrows (as was Apollo in Greek art).¹³⁰ An early epithet of the Canaanite god, in fact, was “he of the arrow.”¹³¹ Familiar from the Biblical passages in which he appears as an attendant of the Hebrew god (*Habakkuk* 3:5 for example), Reseph is believed to have originated in Syria, but ultimately his cult made its way from Mari to Egypt, where it prospered during the 18th and 19th dynasties. Later, in the wake of the wide-ranging voyages of the Phoenician seafarers, Reseph's cult became established throughout the Mediterranean area, but especially in Cyprus, Carthage, and Spain. Upon the island of Cyprus, in fact, where evidence of the god's cult is plentiful, several early inscriptions identify Reseph with Apollo.¹³²

Why the early Greeks identified Reseph with Apollo is an intriguing question, the answer to which is central to recovering a portrait of the archaic Apollo. Several

¹²⁸W. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

¹²⁹C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), p. 125.

¹³⁰W. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Resep* (New Haven, 1976), p. 50.

¹³¹M. Schretter, *Alter Orient und Hellas* (Innsbruck, 1974), p. 151.

¹³²W. Fulco, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

reasons present themselves. The most obvious, as we have seen, is Reseph's intimate association with pestilence and plague. In the Keret text from Ras Shamra, for example, Reseph is said to gather one-fifth of Keret's offspring to himself, an apparent reference to death by pestilence.¹³³ This theme alone would have inspired the Greeks to suspect an affinity between the two archer-gods. There are also indications that Reseph played the role of dragon-slayer in Ugaritic myth, much like Apollo in the Delphic myth of Python. In Ugaritic Text 1001, for example, Reseph appears as the defender of Baal during the latter's battle with a giant dragon. It is Reseph's arrows which finally dispatch the monster, apparently rescuing Baal and the heavenly kingdom in the process (this Ugaritic text is frequently cited as an early prototype of *Habukkuk* 3:3-15, where Yahweh fights the sea; and it is in *Habukkuk* 3 that Reseph appears as Yahweh's satellite).¹³⁴

In other Ugaritic texts, Reseph is identified with the Akkadian Nergal, the pestilence god *par excellence* of the Mesopotamian region.¹³⁵ As we have seen, Nergal was identified with the planet Mars by ancient Babylonian skywatchers, and the same identification appears to distinguish Reseph in Ugaritic texts.¹³⁶ Does this imply that Apollo likewise had some relationship to the red planet?

MARS

In light of Apollo's resemblance to various Oriental gods identified with the planet Mars, it is significant to note that the Greek god's close resemblance to the Latin god Mars has long been acknowledged. Well over a hundred years ago, Roscher documented that the cults of Apollo and Mars were fundamentally analogous.¹³⁷ Roscher pointed to a host of features shared in common between the

¹³³Keret 15-20. Fulco, in fact, compares this very passage with the Iliadic epiphany of Apollo.

¹³⁴J. Day, "New Light on the Mythological Background of the Allusion to Reseph in Habukkuk III 5," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1977), pp. 353-354.

¹³⁵M. Dahood, "Ancient Semitic Deities in Syria and Palestine," in S. Moscati ed., *Le Antiche Divinità Semitiche* (Rome, 1958), p. 84. See also E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), pp. 90-91. Several scholars, in fact, have suggested that Reseph originally split off from Nergal, *rashpu* being one of the latter's epithets. See H. Thompson, *Mekal* (Leiden, 1970), p. 119.

¹³⁶W. K. S., "Reschef," *Reallexikon der Agyptologie*, Vol. 4 (Berlin, 1977), p. 244.

¹³⁷W. Roscher, *Studien zur vergleichenden Mythologie der griechen und romer: Apollon und Mars* (Leipzig, 1873), pp. 51-68. For a similar opinion, see H. S. Versnel, "Apollo and Mars One Hundred Years after Roscher," *Visible Religion* 4 (1986), pp. 132-72. There Versnel writes: "Roscher was right:

two gods, including the following: (1) each was associated with the first month of the year; (2) each was identified with certain animals and sacred trees; (3) each was regarded as a patron of migrations and founder of cities; (4) each was associated with colonizing ventures as exemplified by the Latin *ver sacrum* rite.

Apollo, like Mars, was invoked as a great warrior to fend off the hostile neighbors.¹³⁸ An early Greek prayer invokes Apollo as follows: “Send a far-darting arrow from your bow against the enemy. Strike, O Paian!”¹³⁹ Indeed, the Athenian army appears to have been under the direct patronage of Apollo.¹⁴⁰

Both gods were associated with the advent and warding off of pestilence and disease. The name *Isminthians*—signifying that god who sends, but also averts, plagues of mice (*smintheus* is an ancient Cretan word meaning “mouse”)—is one of the Latin god’s oldest epithets.¹⁴¹

Yet the very same epithet was applied to Apollo in Asia Minor.¹⁴² This fact, if it does not support the identification of Apollo and Mars, at least supports the view that the two gods were functionally analogous in ancient cult. The fact that the cult of Apollo *Smintheus* has yet to be found on mainland Greece—but only upon the outlying islands of Crete and Rhodes, sites of archaic Greek colonies situated between mainland Greece and Asia Minor—is an indication, perhaps, that Apollo’s cult originally came to Greece from the ancient Near East.¹⁴³

An unusual feature of Mars’ cult is the war-god’s identification with a wolf. This motif is attested very early and, as the epithet *lupus Martius* attests, would appear to be central to the mythology and iconography surrounding the Latin god.¹⁴⁴

Mars and Apollo present undeniable structural similarities, but his sun has blinded subsequent investigators.” H. Rose, in *Some Problems of Classical Religion* (Oslo, 1958), pp. 14-15, likewise acknowledged the fundamental affinity of Mars and Apollo.

¹³⁸Aeschylus, *Hepta* 144-146.

¹³⁹Fragment 13 of Timotheus as quoted from C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), p. 120.

¹⁴⁰See the discussion in M. Jameson, “Apollo Lykeios in Athens,” *Archaiognosia* 1 (1980), pp. 234ff.

¹⁴¹H. Wagenvoort, “The Origin of the Ludi Saeculares,” in *Studies in Roman Literature, Culture and Religion* (New York, 1978), p. 219.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 219. See also R.F. Willetts, *Cretan Cults and Festivals* (New York, 1962), p. 269.

¹⁴³L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁴⁴W. Roscher, *op. cit.*, col. 2430.

As Apollo *Lykeios*, the ancient Greeks understood Apollo as a wolf-god (*lykeios* is from a Greek stem meaning “wolf”).¹⁴⁵ As the chorus of Aeschylus’ *Seven* attests, Apollo the wolf was conceived as a warrior: “Lykeios, lord, be wolvisish toward the enemy’s army.”¹⁴⁶ Wolves were sacrificed to Apollo at Argos and elsewhere on the Greek peninsula (this in spite of the fact that wolves were extremely rare animals in Greek cult), and in Argive ritual a wolf was pitted in combat against a bull, this latter rite said to symbolize Apollo’s combat with Poseidon.¹⁴⁷ Although scholars have observed that Apollo’s lupine-characteristics belong to the most archaic stage of his cult, an explanation of the significance of Apollo *Lykeios* has not been forthcoming.¹⁴⁸

Roscher’s otherwise impeccable research was ultimately undermined by his hypothesis that Apollo and Mars were originally solar gods, a view much in vogue at the time but now known to be without merit.¹⁴⁹ Aside from the rather dubious testimony of Macrobius, who had a marked tendency to identify nearly every ancient god with the sun, there is little evidence that the Latin war-god bore any relation to the sun. Classical scholars, likewise, have found that Apollo’s identification with the sun evolved comparatively late in Greek religion. Astour’s opinion is representative of the latest scholarship: “Apollo usurped Helios’ place quite late; in the *Odyssey*, in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and other older works, Apollo has no relation to the sun.”¹⁵⁰

Criticisms of the solar school notwithstanding, many of Roscher’s arguments have great merit, particularly with regard to the supposition that some formidable natural force must lie behind the respective cults of Mars and Apollo. Indeed, a strong argument for identifying Mars as a celestial body is provided by philology,

¹⁴⁵L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-117. See also D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god* (McLean, Virginia, 1991).

¹⁴⁶145-146. Translation by D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-God* (McLean, 1991), p. 16.

¹⁴⁷L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115, and 255.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 117. See now D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-God* (McLean, 1991).

¹⁴⁹G. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 3-4.

¹⁵⁰M. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1967), p. 286. See also K. Kerényi, *Apollo* (Dallas, 1983), p. 52; W. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 74, and L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

Mars tracing to the root *mar*, one meaning of which is “to shine.”¹⁵¹ This etymology, however, need not refer to the sun—it could apply equally well to a planet.

That the worship of Apollo and Mars might have been grounded in ancient traditions associated with the planet Mars seems never to have been suspected.¹⁵² Yet this is clearly a hypothesis well worthy of consideration, given the nexus of traditions shared by Apollo and the Latin war-god, coupled with the explicit identification of the Latin Mars, Babylonian Nergal, and Ugaritic Reseph with the red planet.

The planetary origin of the cults of Mars and Apollo can resolve many of the most difficult questions surrounding the worship of these gods while suggesting clues towards deciphering others. Consider the lupine form shared by Apollo and Mars. Here, too, it is possible to detect a celestial dimension: According to Babylonian astronomical records, the wolf was preeminently the animal associated with the planet Mars, the latter being known as the “wolf-star.”¹⁵³ This Babylonian tradition was apparently taken over by the Greeks and Romans, who likewise assigned Mars the wolf as sacred animal.¹⁵⁴

APOLLO AND ERRA

In *Hesiod and the Near East*, Walcot documents the substantial influence Oriental ideas had on Greek religion and mythology. A subject of discussion was Apollo’s stormy entrance into Olympus:

“The hymn to Apollo opens with a description of how the gods react when Apollo arrives at the house of Zeus. They tremble and all dash from their seats as Apollo enters, stretching his bow...The apprehension felt both by the other gods and by the island is hardly what we expect of a god often said to be the most Greek of all the Olympians, and a rumor which suggests that he was destined to usurp the prerogative of Zeus is more

¹⁵¹W. Roscher, *op. cit.*, col. 2437.

¹⁵²That various aspects of Apollo’s cult might trace to the planet Mars was proposed by M. Theodorakis, “Apollo of the Wolf, the Mouse and the Serpent,” *Kronos* 9:3 (Summer 1984). Working independently of Theodorakis, I defended the same position in a series of articles distributed privately in the fall of 1981.

¹⁵³P. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 65.

¹⁵⁴A. B. Cook, *Zeus*, Vol. I (New York, 1970), p. 626. See also W. Roscher, “Planeten,” *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 2534.

than a trifle surprising. It has been argued, therefore, that such ideas must be referred to an oriental source.”¹⁵⁵

Walcot goes on to compare this passage with the *Enuma Elish*, proposing that Marduk was the Oriental prototype of Apollo. There Walcott cites Marduk’s role as a dragon-slayer and the fact that he could be found equipped with a bow. This hardly seems a sufficient amount of evidence on which to trace a connection, however.

It would appear that Walcott overlooked the most obvious Oriental parallel to the passage in the *Delian Hymn to Apollo*—namely, the *Poem of Erra*. Marduk’s rising from his seat upon the assault of Erra offers a remarkable parallel to the gods of Olympus rising from their seats upon Apollo’s approach.¹⁵⁶ In each case the gods are said to tremble before the intruder. We would also call attention to Erra’s boast: “I want to attain the seat of the King of the gods so that his counsel be not forthcoming.” Is this not a precise parallel to the rumor that Apollo would usurp the prerogative of Zeus?

Why Walcott overlooked the *Poem of Erra* in his search for Oriental influences upon the *Delian Hymn to Apollo* is not easy to say. Certainly the aboriginal Apollo, being a god much involved with the ravages of war and plague, bears a strong resemblance to Erra.¹⁵⁷

RUDRA

¹⁵⁵P. Walcot, *Hesiod and the Near East* (Cardiff, 1966), p. 48.

¹⁵⁶The *Hymn to Delian Apollo* begins as follows: “I will remember and not be unmindful of Apollo who shoots afar. As he goes through the house of Zeus, the gods tremble before him and all spring up from their seats when he draws near, as he bends his bright bow.”

¹⁵⁷Since this was written (1988), Faraone has arrived at much the same conclusion, calling attention to the very same passage in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*. See the discussion in *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), pp. 119-127. There (p. 126) Faraone points to the Hittite god Irra as a possible mediating factor between the cults of Apollo and Erra: “Although it is probably true that Reshep, a very popular pan-mediterranean deity, had a great effect on the development of Apollo in Cyprus, Crete, and the Peloponnesus, he is most likely not the main source of inspiration for the plague god who is called Apollo Smintheus in the *Iliad*. Because of his Anatolian roots, the bow-bearing Hittite god Irra probably has equal if not greater claim as the eastern model for Homer’s archer-god. The name Irra, probably derived from or assimilated to the old Babylonian plague god Erra, means something like ‘scorched earth’..., a suitable enough name for a god connected (like Reshep) with plague and famine, often in a military context.”

It has long been acknowledged that the ancient Indian war-god Rudra bears a striking resemblance to the Homeric Apollo.¹⁵⁸ The original basis behind their similarity, however, remains a mystery.

Various Vedic hymns speak of the destruction and pestilence associated with Rudra's "arrows" or missiles, which rain forth from heaven, slaying men and cattle alike. Consider the following hymn:

"To Rudra we bring these songs, whose bow is firm and strong, the self-dependent God with swiftly-flying shafts...the Conqueror whom none may overcome, armed with sharp-pointed weapons: may he hear our call...May thy bright arrow which, shot down by thee from heaven, flieth upon the earth, pass us uninjured by...Slay us not, nor abandon us, O Rudra."¹⁵⁹

Apparent here is the ominous specter of the god, dealing out death indiscriminately with his heaven-hurled shafts or "arrows." Recall again the earliest epiphany of Apollo in Greek literature:

"Down he strode, wroth at heart, bearing on his shoulders his bow and covered quiver. The arrows rattled on the shoulders of the angry god as he moved; and his coming was like the night. Then he sat down apart from the ships and let fly a shaft; terrible was the twang of his silver bow. The mules he assailed first and the swift dogs, but thereafter on the men themselves he let fly his stinging arrows, and smote; and ever did the pyres of the dead burn thick."¹⁶⁰

Throughout the *Rig Veda* and later Vedic tradition, Rudra's malefic nature is everywhere apparent. And, as was the case with Apollo, Rudra's wrath threatens the gods in heaven as well:

"Malevolence is frequently attributed to Rudra in the R.V.; for the hymns addressed to him chiefly express fear of his terrible shafts and deprecation of his wrath. He is implored not to slay or injure...to avert his great malevolence and his bolt from his worshippers...His ill will and anger are deprecated...He once even receives the epithet 'man-slaying'...Rudra's malevolence is still more prominent in the later Vedic texts...He is invoked not to assail his worshippers with celestial fire and to cause the

¹⁵⁸H. Gregoire & R. Goosens, *Asklepios, Apollon Smintheus, et Rudra* (Brussel, 1949). I have yet to obtain a translation of this work.

¹⁵⁹*Rig Veda* VII:46:1-4

lightning to descend elsewhere. He is even said to assail with fever, cough, and poison...Even the gods were afraid of the strung bow and the arrows of Rudra, lest he should destroy them. Under the name of Mahadeva he is said to slay cattle...His hosts, which attack man and beast with disease and death receive the bloody entrails of the victim...as their peculiar share of the sacrifice.”¹⁶¹

The following passage from the *Rig Veda* captures the essence of the god:

“To the strong Rudra bring we these our songs of praise, to him the Lord of Heroes, ...Him with the braided hair we call with reverence down, the wild-boar of the sky, the red, the dazzling shape...Far be thy dart that killeth men or cattle: thy bliss be with us, O thou Lord of Heroes.”¹⁶²

Who or what, then, is Rudra?¹⁶³ As the red boar of heaven, Rudra is to be identified with the planet Mars.¹⁶⁴ His very name reflects his color—relatively rare among prominent celestial bodies—the most likely etymology tracing it to an ancient word for “red” or “ruddy.”¹⁶⁵ As I have documented elsewhere, numerous ancient gods identified with Mars were named with a word signifying “red.”¹⁶⁶ Here the Celtic war-god Rudiobos/Rudianos (The Red) offers a case in point: In addition to being identified by the ancients with the Latin god Mars, the name of the Celtic god shares a root in common with Rudra.¹⁶⁷

It is noteworthy that Rudra’s darts are specifically linked to the death of cattle. Indeed, Rudra’s intimate association with the destruction of cattle was proverbial in Vedic and later Indian tradition.¹⁶⁸ Is it a coincidence, then, that the very same calamity is associated with Mars and Martian meteorites in Babylonian omens?

¹⁶⁰ *Iliad* I:44ff.

¹⁶¹ A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (New York, 1974), pp. 75-76.

¹⁶² I:114:1-10

¹⁶³ For a survey of previous scholarship bearing on the original nature of Rudra, see V. Machek, “The Gods Rudra and Pusan,” *Archiv Orientalni* 22 (1954), pp. 546ff.

¹⁶⁴ That Apollo shared a special affinity with the boar is indicated by the fact that he was offered that animal as a sacrifice. Apollo is also said to have assumed the form of a boar when he murdered Adonis. See here the discussion in L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), pp. 133ff.

¹⁶⁵ M. & J. Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (London, 1977), p. 253. See also the discussion in E. Arberman, *Rudra: Untersuchungen zum altindischen Glauben und Kultus* (Uppsala, 1922), p. 274, and A. Macdonell, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹⁶⁶ See A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), pp. 169-171.

¹⁶⁷ M. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 27.

¹⁶⁸ A. Macdonell, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76.

Witness the following omen from Old Babylonian times: “If Salbatanu [the planet Mars] flames up and destroys the cattle.”¹⁶⁹ The following omen is also of interest: “If in the sky a meteor (train) from a planet [*Mustabarru mutanu*=Mars] appears: destruction of cattle will occur in the land.”¹⁷⁰ According to Jastrow, one of the most common omens associated with the red planet was “destruction of cattle.”¹⁷¹

The resemblance between Apollo and Rudra goes far beyond their mutual association with pestilence and missiles thrown from heaven. As Rudra was regarded as a “boar of heaven,” so too was Apollo viewed as a “boar.”¹⁷² As Apollo was depicted as an aniconic pillar (as *Agyieus*)¹⁷³, the same was true of Rudra.¹⁷⁴ As Apollo was associated with the mouse in his name of *Smintheus*¹⁷⁵, so too did a mouse form the special attendant of Rudra.¹⁷⁶ As Apollo was thought to have originally been at home in the North¹⁷⁷, so was Rudra known to be a “dweller in the north.”¹⁷⁸ As Apollo served as a god of song and music in the Homeric period¹⁷⁹, so, too, was Rudra a god of music and singing.¹⁸⁰ As the Athenian army appears to have been under the direct patronage of the warrior-Apollo¹⁸¹, Rudra was invoked as the protector of warriors.¹⁸² As the ancient Greeks understood the name of Apollo to signify a “destroyer,” Rudra appears as the destroyer *par excellence*, one hymn placing the following words in the god’s mouth: “I stand as the destroyer.”¹⁸³ As

¹⁶⁹E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 34.

¹⁷⁰J. Bjorkman, *Meteors and Meteorites in the Ancient Near East* (Tempe, 1973), p. 120.

¹⁷¹M. Jastrow, “Signs and Names of the Planet Mars,” *Am. Journal of Semitic Languages* 27 (1910/1911), p. 65.

¹⁷²See here the discussion in L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), pp. 133ff.

¹⁷³L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), pp. 149ff.

¹⁷⁴*MBh.* 7.173.92; *Skanda Purana*, 7.2.9.13-14. See also the discussion in S. Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 119-122.

¹⁷⁵M. Schretter, *Alter Orient und Hellas* (Innsbruck, 1974), pp. 174-182.

¹⁷⁶S. Bhattacharji, “Rudra From the Vedas to the Mahabharata,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 41 (1960), p. 88.

¹⁷⁷L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹⁷⁸*Satapatha Brahmana*, 2.6.2.17. See also S. Bhattacharji, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

¹⁷⁹L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 243ff.

¹⁸⁰S. Bhattacharji, “Rudra From the Vedas to the Mahabharata,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 41 (1960), p. 94.

¹⁸¹See the discussion in M. Jameson, “Apollo Lykeios in Athens,” *Archaiognosia* 1 (1980), pp. 234ff.

¹⁸²*Taittiriya Samhita*, 4.5.2; 4.5.8, 9.

¹⁸³*Skanda Purana*, 7.2.9.13-14.

Apollo was invoked to aid in the growth of trees, vegetation, and the harvest¹⁸⁴, so also was Rudra.¹⁸⁵ And as Homer remembered Apollo as a great healer—indeed, as the physician of the gods—so, too, was Rudra invoked as the greatest physician of the gods.¹⁸⁶

MARS GODS IN THE NEW WORLD

Thus far we have investigated various gods of the Old World, including Heracles, Gilgamesh, Reseph, Mars, Apollo, Rudra, and others, discovering compelling evidence that each of them originally personified the planet Mars, their cults reflecting ancient conceptions associated with the red planet. Throughout our investigation the cult of Nergal has loomed large, not only because of its antiquity but because it offers a solid link with the earliest astronomical traditions of Babylon. As we have sought to document, the distinctive characteristics in the cult of Nergal have their origin in the ancient conceptions associated with the planet Mars. This opinion stands in sharp contrast to that of most leading scholars in ancient Near Eastern religions, which holds that Nergal's singular characteristics—the god's connection with war and pestilence, for example—originally bore no relation whatsoever to any objective phenomena associated with the red planet. According to this argument—evident in the presentation of such scholars as Jastrow and Jacobsen—the peculiar mythology that eventually came to surround Mars stems from the early identification of that planet with the Akkadian war-god Nergal, that identification being wholly arbitrary in nature.¹⁸⁷ The end result of this fortuitous set of circumstances culminating in the identification of Nergal with the planet Mars—so the argument goes—was that such traditions ultimately became diffused throughout the Old World upon the inheritance of Babylonian science by the Greeks and Indians.

At first sight this argument has some appeal. Certainly there is no denying the fact that Babylonian astronomy had an enormous influence upon early astronomical

¹⁸⁴L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 124ff.

¹⁸⁵S. Bhattacharji, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁸⁷M. Jastrow, *Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice in Babylonia and Assyria* (New York, 1910), pp. 107, 108, 224, 225. See also T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976). This is also the approach of Anthony Aveni in his recent book, *Conversing With Planets: How Science and Myth Reinvented the Cosmos* (New York, 1992).

conceptions of the Greeks and other Old World cultures. The Greeks admitted as much,¹⁸⁸ and analysis of the Greek and Indian traditions surrounding the various celestial bodies confirms that such was indeed the case.¹⁸⁹

Upon closer examination, however, it can be shown that diffusion from Babylon cannot account for the complex mythology which came to be associated with the respective planets. Indeed, it is demonstrable that the myriad of characteristic traditions which came to surround Mars originated in direct response to that planet's unique appearance and behavior.

Here we would propose the following test: If the Old World traditions surrounding the planets originated in ancient Near Eastern religious practice, it would stand to reason that archaeoastronomical traditions from the Americas must needs be of a different nature. If Mars' association with war and pestilence (not to mention swords, eclipses, death, destruction, rebellion, healing, the underworld, the Cosmic Tree, World Pillar, etc.) truly stems from the cult of Nergal and not from any objective phenomena associated with the red planet, one would hardly expect to find that Mesoamerican skywatchers preserved similar traditions (that is, of course, unless one would be willing to entertain the hypothesis of diffusion of Babylonian astronomy to the New World¹⁹⁰).

Here then is fertile ground for inquiry: If the New World sources preserve traditions paralleling those from the ancient Near East, a *prima facie* case is thereby made for the thesis defended here, which holds that the characteristic mythological traditions surrounding the respective planets stem from objective astronomical events

¹⁸⁸Plato, *Epinomis* 986e-987a; Aristotle, *De Caelo* 292a8. See also the discussion in D.R. Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle* (Ithaca, 1970), pp. 145-146.

¹⁸⁹See the following articles of David Pingree: "The Mesopotamian Origin of Early Indian Mathematical Astronomy," *JHA* 4 (1973), pp. 1-12; "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," *Isis* 54 (1963), pp. 229-246.

¹⁹⁰There would appear to be very little evidence in favor of such diffusion, although some scholars—most notably Levi-Strauss, de Santillana and von Dechend, and Linda Schele—confronted by the striking similarity of mythical traditions spanning the Old and New Worlds, have been driven to postulate the diffusion of Old World celestial myths to the New World. Yet even if we admit that aboriginal Indians would have brought archaic astronomical traditions with them as they migrated to North and South America, there is still no reason to suspect that they were aware of Babylonian astronomy.

and observations. If such traditions are absent in the New World, the argument swings in favor of the conventional position.

ARCHAEOASTRONOMY

Thanks in large part to the emergence of archaeoastronomy as a serious scientific discipline, great strides have been made in the past several decades towards delineating the role played by planets in ancient religion and science. To date the vast majority of such studies have been done by scholars specializing in Mesoamerican cultures. Unlike their counterparts investigating ancient Near Eastern cultures, these scholars have been open to the possibility that astronomical phenomena influenced early religious conceptions. David Kelley, for example, has observed:

“It has been clear to all serious students of Mesoamerican culture that there was an intimate relationship between astronomical knowledge, the calendar, and religious beliefs and rituals.”¹⁹¹

Susan Milbrath voiced a similar opinion:

“A number of scholars agree that the fundamental nature of the ancient Mesoamerican pantheon is astronomical.”¹⁹²

Numerous studies have documented the importance of Venus to the Maya. Floyd Lounsbury has shown that the ancient Maya regulated various aspects of their calendar and certain ritual practices around the movements of the planet Venus.¹⁹³ Other scholars have shown that Maya architecture bears the distinctive mark of a long-time preoccupation with the observation of Venus.¹⁹⁴ If Venus played such a prominent role in the imagination and cultural practices of the ancient Maya, certainly it is conceivable that the other planets have also left their mark, hitherto unnoticed.

How, then, are we to discover which planets were worshipped by the Mesoamericans? A very simple methodology serves as the logical basis of this chapter: If the mythological characteristics of such Old World gods as Nergal and

¹⁹¹D. Kelley, “Astronomical Identities of Mesoamerican Gods,” *Archaeoastronomy 2 JHA* (Fall 1985), pp. 23ff.

¹⁹²S. Milbrath, “Astronomical Imagery in the Serpent Sequence of the Madrid Codex,” in A. Aveni ed., *Archaeoastronomy in Pre-Columbian America* (Austin, 1975), p. 263.

¹⁹³F. Lounsbury, “Maya numeration, computation and calendrical astronomy,” in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, ed. by C.C. Gillispie (New York, 1978), pp. 759-818.

Ishtar reflected spectacular events involving the planets Mars and Venus respectively, it stands to reason that such events could hardly have gone unnoticed by the earliest inhabitants of the New World. Having elsewhere documented striking correspondences between Old and New World traditions associated with the planet Venus¹⁹⁵, we turn in this chapter to ancient conceptions associated with the planet Mars. Find the god or mythical figure among the sacred traditions of Mesoamerica who most corresponds in nature and deeds to Nergal and it is a good bet that one has found the planet Mars.

Such a figure is the Aztec Tezcatlipoca. Here the epithets of the Mexican god are especially significant, it being well-known that such names frequently preserve archaic aspects of religious cult. Indeed, it is often the case that the god's worshippers themselves have forgotten the original significance of the epithet in question and yet are at great pains to transmit the sacred name nonetheless (Homer is especially notorious in this regard). The more specific and unusual the epithet, the more significance it bears should a parallel be found in the traditions of another god or planet.

TEZCATLIPOCA

At the time of the Spanish conquest, Tezcatlipoca featured prominently in most pantheons of Central Mexico. Of him, Nicholson remarked: "Tezcatlipoca is perhaps the most interesting and revealing of all the late pre-Hispanic central Mexican deities."¹⁹⁶ Virtually nothing is known of the god's origins, however.¹⁹⁷

Many of the scholars who have investigated the cult of Tezcatlipoca have emphasized its celestial character, some identifying the god with the Sun¹⁹⁸, or with

¹⁹⁴A. Aveni, "Venus and the Maya," *American Scientist* 67 (1979), pp. 279-285.

¹⁹⁵E. Cochrane, "On Comets and Kings," *Aeon* 2:1 (1989), pp. 53-75. See also D. Talbott, "The Great Comet Venus," *Aeon* 3:5 (1994), pp. 5-51.

¹⁹⁶H. Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians* Vol. 10, R. Wauchope, ed., (Austin, 1971), pp. 411-412.

¹⁹⁷B. Brundage, *The Phoenix of the Western World* (Norman, 1981), p. 245, writes: "Nothing is known about the early forms of Tezcatlipoca."

¹⁹⁸L. Sejourne, *Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico* (Berkeley, 1976), p. 166. See also D. Kelley, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-43.

the planet Venus¹⁹⁹, Jupiter²⁰⁰, the Night Sky²⁰¹, or Great Bear. Others, inspired by the god's intimate relationship to sorcery and disease, have sought to understand his cult in terms of early conceptions associated with shamanism. This position was defended by Brundage, for example:

“Tezcatlipoca has several facets to his personality, but I believe him to have been originally and most persuasively modeled on the American Indian shaman. The accretions of the centuries have naturally obscured this shamanic archetype to some extent. But he is still there, behind the scenes. By any analysis Tezcatlipoca was an invisible and omniextensive god, a sorcerer, a trickster, a manic, a seer, and a shape shifter—all these pertain to his shamanic origins and they are still crucial elements in his later appearances.”²⁰²

Despite the best efforts of numerous scholars—some of them being among the leading names in the field—Tezcatlipoca's original nature remains elusive. As an example of the theoretical contortions to which scholars have been driven in order to account for his cult, consider the following “interpretation” offered by Alexander:

“For Tezcatlipoca in one of his many functions is deity of the setting sun. In other aspects he is a moon-god, the moon of the evening skies; again, a divinity of the night; or sometimes, with blindfolded eyes, a god of the underworld and of the dead;...he is represented as a regent of the northern heavens, although sometimes (perhaps identified with Huitzilopochtli) he is ruler of the south. Probably he is at bottom the incarnation of the changing heavens, symbolized by his mirror, now fiery, now murky, reflecting the encompassed universe.”²⁰³

Sun, Moon, Night, god of the Underworld, Regent of the Northern Heavens, Regent of the South—In its attempt to be all-encompassing, Alexander's analysis contributes little towards clarification of Tezcatlipoca's original nature.

The interpretation offered by Sejourne is even more esoteric:

¹⁹⁹A. Aveni, *Conversing With the Planets* (New York, 1992), p. 100. See also B. Brundage, *The Phoenix of the Western World* (Norman, 1982), p. 238.

²⁰⁰See the discussion in E. Hunt, *The Transformation of the Hummingbird* (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 145-148, who cites Escalona-Ramos and de Santillana and von Dechend.

²⁰¹B. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin, 1979), p. 84. See also L. Sejourne, *op. cit.*, p. 166. N. Davies, *The Toltecs* (Norman, 1977), p. 386.

²⁰²B. Brundage, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

²⁰³H. B. Alexander, *Latin-American Mythology* (New York, 1964), pp. 61-62.

“His nebulous and shifting character, and also his close connection with activities of the most profane kind, suggests that Tezcatlipoca, image of the Earth Sun, is really humanity itself, symbolizing the matter in which the Sun becomes incarnate. If this is so, then the many different facets of the god would represent the reflections of this opaque and shifting mass in search of salvation.”²⁰⁴

Certainly it is difficult to make much sense out of such interpretations which, after all, could explain anything.

In the hopes of shedding some light on the question of Tezcatlipoca’s origins, we propose comparing his cult with that of Nergal.

TEZCATLIPOCA AS WARRIOR

Like Nergal, Tezcatlipoca was first and foremost a god of war. Fray Bernardino de Sahagun offered the following account of his cult:

“Tezcatlipoca was considered and held as the true and invisible god who walked all over the heavens and the earth and hell. They were afraid that whenever he trod on earth he caused wars, enmities and discords, all of which meant a great deal of trouble and anxieties. They said that he himself incited the people against one another, causing them to have wars, and for this reason they called him Necocyautl, which means sower of discord on both sides.”²⁰⁵

Aztec iconography, quite naturally, reflects Tezcatlipoca’s bellicose nature. According to Brundage, Tezcatlipoca:

“is generally depicted as a warrior armed with atlatl, darts, and shield. He carries a war banner which may be blazoned with his peculiar device, the smoking mirror...He wears the double heron feathers of the Aztec warrior in his hair and has, strapped on his back, a towering feathered backpiece.”²⁰⁶

Various epithets of Tezcatlipoca have reference to his warrior-aspect. *Yaotl*, for example, signifies “the enemy.”²⁰⁷ According to Brundage, *Yaotl* represented war itself, much as Nergal, Ares, and Mars personified “war” in the Old World. Special emphasis was placed upon the god’s youthfulness: “Because Yaotl was a warrior, his

²⁰⁴L. Sejourne, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

²⁰⁵B. de Sahagun, *A History of Ancient Mexico* (Detroit, 1971), p. 25.

²⁰⁶B. Brundage, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

²⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. 86.

youth was also stressed and in this transfiguration he becomes Telpochtli, the young Male, conceived to be a virgin.”²⁰⁸

The epithet *Telpochtli*, as we will see, finds a striking parallel in the cults of the great war-gods in the Old World. Nergal, for example, was known as *sul*, “youth.”²⁰⁹ An epithet of the Vedic war-god Indra was *yuvan*, “youth.”²¹⁰ The Indian war-god of the Epic period, Skanda—expressly identified with the planet Mars—was known as *Kumara*, “youth.”²¹¹

As a god of war, it was only natural that Tezcatlipoca served as the patron of the *telpochcalli*, the school at which the youth of Tenochitlan were trained in the arts of war.²¹² In this latter function, the Aztec god served in the same capacity as Mars and Apollo, each of whom we have identified with the red planet.²¹³

As we have seen (citing Sahugan), special emphasis was placed upon Tezcatlipoca’s fickleness as a warrior. One epithet—*Necocyautl*—commemorates his capacity for fighting indiscriminately, first on one side, then on the other: “He was also called the Enemy of Both Sides, which stressed his single-minded concentration on discord itself, not on the victory of any one faction.”²¹⁴ Here, too, we meet with similar reports surrounding the great war-gods of the Old World. The Greek Ares and Latin Mars were each renowned for their capricious nature, meting out death with an indiscriminate zest. Ares’ propensity for fighting first for one side, then for another, earned him the epithet *alloprosallos*, “fickle.”²¹⁵

²⁰⁸*Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁰⁹E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 16.

²¹⁰M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 820.

²¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 237.

²¹²H. B. Nicholson, “The Birth of the Smoking Mirror,” *Archaeology* 7:3 (1954), p. 169.

²¹³See E. Cochrane, “Origins of the Latin God Mars,” *Chronology and Catastrophism Review* 15 (1993), pp. 27-31; “Apollo and the Planet Mars,” *Aeon* 1:1 (1988), pp. 52-62. On the association of Mars and Apollo with various rites of war, see the valuable discussion in H.S. Versnel, “Apollo and Mars One Hundred Years After Roscher,” *Visible Religion* 4 (1986), pp. 150-152. See also M. Jameson, “Apollo Lykeios in Athens,” *Archaiognosia* 1 (1980), pp. 224-235. Military contests were also a feature of Heracles’ cult. See B. Bergquist, *Herakles on Thasos* (Uppsala, 1973), pp. 37, 58.

²¹⁴B. Brundage, *op. cit.*, p. 85. See also B. de Sahugan, *A History of Ancient Mexico* (Detroit, 1971), p. 25.

²¹⁵*Iliad* 5:831, 889.

The Latin god Mars, similarly, became synonymous with the rage and fury of war. A frequent epithet coupled with Mars is *saevio*, “to rage, be fierce, vent one’s rage.” Yet it is the epithet *caecus*, “blind,” which best captures the god’s capricious nature:

“The ambiguous character of Mars, when he breaks loose on the field of battle, accounts for the epithet *caecus* given him by the poets. At a certain stage of furor, he abandons himself to his nature, destroying friend as well as foe...By virtue of these very qualities of furor and harshness, Mars is the surest bulwark of Rome against every aggressor.”²¹⁶

The blindness accorded the Latin Mars finds an intriguing parallel in the cult of Tezcatlipoca, who was represented as blindfolded and identified with *Ixquimilli*, “the Blindfolded One.”²¹⁷ As Brundage noted, this god had a very specific celestial reference: “The star assigned him in the heavens was supposed to be blindfolded, to walk backward, and to be, whenever it appeared, an omen of war.”²¹⁸

As to which star this might be, Brundage offered nary a clue. It is well-known, however, that the planet Mars was commonly regarded as an omen of war throughout the ancient world. In ancient Babylon, Mars was regarded as the planet of war and singled out for its “erratic” nature.²¹⁹ Similar conceptions prevailed in ancient China, where the advent of Mars portended “bane, grief, war, and murder.”²²⁰ In ancient India, as we have seen, Mars was described as a warrior and accorded a “fickle” nature.²²¹ While this does not conclusively identify Tezcatlipoca with Mars—Venus also being regarded as an omen of war by various ancient cultures—it is at least consistent with such a conclusion.

In addition to the connection of Mars with war and erratic behavior, it is probable that the curious gait ascribed to Tezcatlipoca’s star likewise has reference to the red planet. Thus, more than one ancient culture remarked upon Mars’ propensity for

²¹⁶G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1970) p. 229.

²¹⁷B. Brundage, *op. cit.*, p. 86. E. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Norman, 1975), p. 220, likewise relates Tezcatlipoca to Ixquimilli. Thompson would identify Izquimilli with the planet Venus, however. See E. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion* (Norman, 1970), p. 249.

²¹⁸B. Brundage, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²¹⁹E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 77. As the erratic or “unfathomable” star, Mars was known as *kakkab la minati*.

²²⁰E. Schafer, *Pacing the Void* (Berkeley, 1977), p. 215

walking backwards. In Egyptian tradition, Mars was known as *Sba aabti tcha pet*, “the planet that moved onwards and retreated.”²²² Another name for Mars was *Horteshor*, “the Red Horus.” According to Budge: “He was said ‘to journey backwards in traveling’.”²²³

Plato called attention to Mars’ peculiar retrograde movement in the *Republic*.²²⁴ Hudson and Underhay reported that similar conceptions prevailed among the Chumash Indians of California.²²⁵ According to Anthony Aveni, the peculiar movements of the red planet have long fascinated skywatchers:

“The retrograde loop is part of a triple, compound motion unique to the planets, and its recognition has had an indelible impact, at least on our Western astronomy, from the time of the Babylonians and Greeks all the way up to Copernicus and the Renaissance.”²²⁶

GOD OF PESTILENCE

Like the Akkadian Nergal, Tezcatlipoca was credited with the power of inducing pestilence and famine.²²⁷ Consider the following portrait of Tezcatlipoca’s cult offered by Fray Diego Duran: “He was held to be the god who sent drought, famine, barrenness in the seasons, and plagues.”²²⁸ Sahugan preserves a similar report: “They said that this god sent to the living (creatures) poverty, misery, and incurable and contagious diseases such as leprosy, buboes, gout, mange and dropsy.”²²⁹

²²¹S. Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities* (Lewiston, 1995), pp. 40-41, 186. There, Markel cites Santhanam, *Brihat Parasara Hora*, 1:31-33 to the following effect: “Mars has blood-red eyes, is fickle-minded...given to anger...”

²²²E. Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1978), p. 656.

²²³E. Budge, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1988), p. 244. See also R. Parker, “Ancient Egyptian Astronomy,” *Proc. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. A*, 276, p. 60, who adds that: “‘he travels backwards’, speaks to be sure of the planet’s retrograde movement, but all planets share this peculiarity.”

²²⁴617b. See the discussion in D. R. Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle* (Ithaca, 1970), pp. 112-113.

²²⁵See T. Hudson & E. Underhay, *Crystals in the Sky: An Intellectual Odyssey Involving Chumash Astronomy, Cosmology, and Rock Art* (Socorro, 1978), p. 93.

²²⁶A. Aveni, *Conversing With the Planets* (New York, 1992), p. 26.

²²⁷B. Brundage, *The Phoenix of the Western World* (Norman, 1982), p. 277.

²²⁸D. Duran, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

²²⁹B. de Sahugan, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

In accordance with Tezcatlipoca's capricious nature, pestilence and disease were meted out at random: "He sends disease, not always as punishment and sometimes without reason."²³⁰ According to Brundage, this led the natives to curse the great god:

"Tezcatlipoca is the only Aztec god known to have been abused by his devotees for his misdeeds. Disease was one of his gifts; often a person who was so afflicted, having petitioned the god in vain, ended up cursing him."²³¹

As noted earlier, the god Xipe—known as the Red Tezcatlipoca—was deemed responsible for various diseases and afflictions, especially diseases of the eye. Thus, the *Florentine Codex* credits the god with having "visited the people with blisters, festering, pimples, eye pains, watering of the eyes...withering of the eyes, cataracts, glazing of the eyes."²³²

De Sahugan preserves a similar account of the maladies associated with Xipe: "To this god they attributed the following diseases: small-pox, tumours that form anywhere on the body, itch, also diseases of the eyes such as the soreness of eyes resulting from excessive drinking, and all other eye complaints."²³³

With reference to the traditions associated with Xipe and their possible reference to the planet Mars, it is significant to note that the Zinacantecan Indians, heirs to the ancient beliefs of the Maya, continue to believe that the red planet is chiefly responsible for diseases of the eyes.²³⁴ Such beliefs prompted E. Hunt to identify Xipe—the Red Tezcatlipoca—with the planet Mars.²³⁵

As we have discovered, there is much to be said for Hunt's identification. Throughout the ancient world, for no reason apparent to modern astronomers, the red planet was consistently associated with death, pestilence, and the onset of disease. In Babylonian astronomical texts, as we have seen, the epithet *mustabarru mutanu*—"swollen with pestilence"—was applied to the planet Mars.

²³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 101.

²³¹B. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin, 1979), p. 89.

²³²E. Hunt, *The Transformation of the Hummingbird* (Ithaca, 1977), p. 144.

²³³B. de Sahugan, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

²³⁴E. Hunt, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-145.

²³⁵*Ibid.*

As noted elsewhere, it was a common to find the dreaded god of pestilence invoked as an agent of healing. Old World worshippers of Nergal, Mars, and Apollo, for example, appealed to their beloved god as an agent of healing.²³⁶ As we might expect, the very same motif is found in the cult of Tezcatlipoca: “Women with sick children held them out to him and begged that he withdraw his evil from them; he was the god in whose providence were also all good things, fame and wealth, health and the esteem of others.”²³⁷

INTERLUDE

Our survey thus far has documented that various gods who otherwise bear a striking resemblance to each other—Heracles, Nergal, Erra, Reseph, and Mars—were each identified with the planet Mars. Other gods with similar characteristics—Apollo, Rudra, Gilgamesh and Tezcatlipoca—we would also identify with the red planet. Before proceeding, a word or two is in order about methodology, for our ultimate goal is to bring the methods of science to bear upon the study of mythology.

The science of mythology, as I’ve come to practice it, has three essential components, each dependent upon the comparative method: (1) the elucidation of parallels between the myths and mythical characters of different cultures; (2) the identification of various mythical characters with a particular celestial body, if possible; and (3) a reconstruction of the celestial scenario behind the respective myths—specifically, an analysis of the unique behavior or visual phenomena associated with the planet(s) which gave rise to the particular mythical character in question.

While all three components should be considered necessary steps in a scientific approach to myth, it is also true that each of the various stages of analysis may stand on their own. For example, our documentation of the numerous parallels which exist between Heracles and Nergal, or between Apollo and Rudra, remains valid whether or not one accepts the identification of these particular figures with the planet Mars. Similarly, were comparative mythologists to grant the possibility that Heracles and

²³⁶E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 22. On healing cults associated with Mars and Apollo, see M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (London, 1992), pp. 114-115.

Nergal are mythical twins, each modeled upon the planet Mars, it is always possible that some other explanation besides that offered here can be found to explain the red planet's peculiar mythical prominence (that of de Santillana and von Dechend, for example).

Although a satisfactory analysis of a particular myth necessarily involves completion of each of these three steps, in actual practice—as in psychoanalysis—one rarely achieves a complete or perfect analysis. As with all historical reconstructions, there are always pieces of the puzzle which remain elusive and obscure. There are several reasons for this situation, including the fragmentary nature of the myths themselves; the intrusion of foreign elements into a cult resulting in a modification or distortion of the original myth; problems caused by the faulty transmission and/or translation of a particular myth; and gaps in our knowledge regarding the chronology of the events surrounding the formation, evolution, and eventual dissolution of the previous catastrophic solar system.

It is our opinion that most of these difficulties can be compensated for by the comparative method. For example, the various anomalies in the traditions surrounding Heracles receive clarification by comparative analysis of the extensive materials provided by the cults of the Akkadian Nergal and Vedic Indra.

INDRA

If the ancients' identification of Nergal with the planet Mars has a rational basis, it will provide us with an invaluable foundation upon which to launch a comparative analysis of ancient mythology. Nearly every ancient culture of which we have sufficient record has preserved traditions of a great war-god whose primary functions included leading the battle-charge and defending the kingdom against invasion and evil influences. The names of several of these gods, such as the Greek Ares and Latin Mars, are well-known. Other war-gods, if less familiar, were equally prominent in olden times. In this chapter we will focus our attention on the Vedic god Indra. Indra bears all the earmarks of great heroes elsewhere—dragon-slayer, champion of the

²³⁷B. Brundage, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

gods, invincible warrior, glutton, great sinner, etc.²³⁸ Indeed, with the possible exception of the cycle of myths associated with Heracles, Indra's cult offers the most complete body of materials we have for reconstructing the archetype of the warrior hero.

It is well-known that the cult of Indra, prominent at the time of the composition of the *Rig Veda*, waned considerably under the influence of post-Vedic religious reform. This diminution in Indra's celebrity coincided with the rise of cults associated with Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva, each of whom usurped some of the Vedic functions of Indra.²³⁹ A similar demotion is apparent in Iran, where Indra became relegated to the status of a low-grade demon.²⁴⁰ Given the degeneration in Indra's status in post-Vedic times, it stands to reason that the *Rig Veda* offers the best guide in reconstructing the god's original cult. This is not to say that the traditions found in the *Atharva Veda*, *Mahabharata*, and numerous other texts are irrelevant to a discussion of Indra's mythus—far from it; only that one must beware of revisionist tendencies in these later texts. Puhvel's commentary on this state of affairs is most pertinent:

“Late Vedic and post-Vedic tradition, where Indra's godhead progressively declines with the onset and elaboration of Brahmanism, is still replete with increasingly submythological, epic, and folkloric Indra lore, some of it in direct succession and elaboration of the Vedas, other parts purveying potentially important ancient para-Vedic tradition, still others probably reflecting the fictional impulses of a later age.”²⁴¹

Although the mythical deeds of Indra form a focal point of the *Rig Veda*, it is by no means a simple matter to interpret their original significance. Not unlike the Egyptian *Pyramid Texts*, the Vedic hymns typically present only the barest outlines of a particular myth, the details of the tradition, presumably, being thoroughly familiar to the audience. Moreover, although it forms the oldest body of Indian texts, the *Veda*

²³⁸It is significant to note that the epithet *sura*, “hero,” is almost exclusively Indra's in the *Rig Veda*. See J. Gonda, *Some Observations on the Relations Between 'Gods' and 'Powers' in the Veda...* (s-Gravenhage, 1957), pp. 50-51.

²³⁹A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (New York, 1974), p. 66.

²⁴⁰A. Carnoy, “Iranian Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (Boston, 1917), p. 265.

²⁴¹J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, 1989), p. 53.

itself is the product of numerous authors and bears every sign of having undergone a considerable evolution.²⁴² Thus it is hardly surprising, in light of such a history, to find that the Vedic traditions—including those involving Indra—display various contradictions and secondary accretions. With specific reference to the Indra-traditions, Dumézil offered the following assessment of these ancient texts:

“The authors of the poems who give praise to Indra sometimes make multiple references to the most diverse parts of this tradition, sometimes exalt one particular point, but they do not trouble themselves to present an episode in full, or to establish, between their allusions to several episodes, a logical or chronological nexus; they do not even confine themselves to one variant...or balk at contradictions in the same hymn: what does it matter, when all the versions of these grand events work together for the glory, the ‘increasing,’ of the god?”²⁴³

It is with these bare “bones” of ancient cult that we must work if we are to unravel the origins of Indra.²⁴⁴ Here the comparative method represents an indispensable analytic tool. Like comparative anatomy in biology, comparative mythology allows for the recognition of parallels in seemingly diverse forms from different times and places and—once such parallels are established—the reconstruction of a god’s cult can begin, not unlike the reconstruction of a fossil hominid from a few teeth and an occasional bone. If a crucial link in the sacred dossier of Indra has been lost, perhaps it can be recovered from the dossier of some other hero. In this way, and in this way only, in our opinion, is it possible to arrive at a true understanding of the origins of Indra’s cult, much of which has been lost or otherwise obscured with the passage of untold millennia.

A summary of Indra’s career would include the following mythological themes: (1) his unusual birth and rapid rise to power; (2) the defeat of the dragon Vritra; (3) the winning of the sun and initiation of the dawn; (4) the ordering of the cosmos and the support of heaven; (5) his reputation as a great drinker of soma. We will summarize each of these events in short order.

²⁴²According to R. Crossland, “Immigrants From the North,” in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 1:2 (Cambridge, 1980), p. 851, Vedic literature “is not demonstrably older than c. 1000 BCE.” According to Jaan Puhvel, it stems from c. 500 BCE. See J. Puhvel, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

²⁴³G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 38.

INDRA'S BIRTH

Indra's birth, according to various accounts of the event, was an occasion of great commotion, the tumult extending to the domain of the gods themselves: "When he, yea, he, comes forth the firmset mountains and the whole heaven and earth, tremble for terror."²⁴⁵ The tumultuous nature of Indra's epiphany is also apparent in the following passage:

"Thou art the Mighty One; when born, O Indra, with power thou terrifiedst earth and heaven; When, in their fear of thee, all firm-set mountains and monstrous creatures shook like dust before thee."²⁴⁶

The unusual circumstances attending the war-god's birth have frequently drawn the attention of scholars. Ions, for example, observed that: "At the time of Indra's birth from Prithivi's side the heavens, earth and mountains began to shake and all the gods were afraid." The gods feared that Indra "was the herald of great changes in the divine order and possibly of their own doom."²⁴⁷

As we will discover, the gods had good reason to be alarmed.

Numerous passages relate that soon after his birth Indra assumed the form of a gigantic warrior whose body spanned the heavens. "Impetuous Indra in his might exceedeth wide vast mid-air and heaven and earth together."²⁴⁸ A similar passage is the following: "Indra, Impetuous One, hath waxed immensely: he with his vastness hath filled earth and heaven."²⁴⁹ Most impressive, perhaps, is the following passage: "He filled the earthly atmosphere and pressed against the lights of heaven."²⁵⁰

Throughout the *Veda* there is a decided emphasis upon the fact that Indra's sudden growth to gargantuan proportions was nearly instantaneous with his birth:

²⁴⁴J. Puhvel, *op. cit.*, p. 42, refers to the Vedic traditions as "faithfully preserved linguistic petrifacts."

²⁴⁵I:61:14 All quotes are taken from R. Griffith's translation of the Rig Veda unless otherwise indicated. See Ralph Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda* (Delhi, 1973).

²⁴⁶I:63:1

²⁴⁷V. Ions, *Indian Mythology* (London, 1968), p. 15.

²⁴⁸III:46:3

²⁴⁹IV:16:5

²⁵⁰I:81:5

“Deeming him a reproach, his mother hid him, Indra, endowed with all heroic valor. Then up he sprang himself, assumed his vesture, and filled, as soon as born, the earth and heaven.”²⁵¹

The precocious growth and heaven-spanning form of the Vedic war-god constitutes a serious problem of interpretation, one which will occupy us later in this chapter.

THE DEFEAT OF THE DRAGON AND THE RELEASE OF THE SUN

Significantly, it was shortly after his birth that Indra battled and eventually slew the dragon Vritra. Vritra’s great crime lay in his concealment of the sun and imprisonment of the waters. In defeating the monster, Indra secured the release of the sun together with the life-giving waters. This primeval event is the subject of countless passages in the *Rig Veda*:

“Moreover, when thou first wast born, O Indra, thou struckest terror into all the people. Thou, Maghavan, rentest with thy bolt the Dragon who lay against the waterfloods of heaven.”²⁵²

Another typical passage celebrates Indra as follows:

“I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder. He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents. He slew the Dragon lying on the mountain; his heavenly bolt of thunder Tvaster fashioned. Like lowing kine in rapid flow descending the waters glided downward to the ocean.”²⁵³

Here, as so often in the Vedic texts, the cascading celestial waters are compared to cows.

Indra’s decisive role in the release of the waters is emphasized again and again in the Vedic texts: “Vritra he slew, and forced the flood of water forth.”²⁵⁴ A similar

²⁵¹IV:18:5 Indra’s rapid growth and rise to power is also apparent in the following passage: “Him who hath waxed by strength which none may conquer, and even at once grown to perfection.” *Ibid.*, V:19:2

²⁵²IV:17:7

²⁵³I:32:1-3

²⁵⁴I:85:9-10

passage is the following: “Thou in thy vigor having slaughtered Vritra didst free the floods arrested by the Dragon.”²⁵⁵

It was the release of the sun, however, which marked Indra’s finest hour: “He who gave being to the Sun and Morning, who leads the waters, He, O men, is Indra.”²⁵⁶ Brown considered this to be Indra’s crowning achievement:

“The sun, it is stated many times, was won by Indra. It had been in darkness...His mighty deed is that he gains the sun, which he set in the sky after slaying Vritra.”²⁵⁷

THE SUPPORT OF HEAVEN

Upon securing the release of the sun, Indra is said to have offered it some form of support.

“He who, just born, chief God of lofty spirit by power and might became the God’s protector. Before whose breath through greatness of his valor the two worlds trembled, He, O men, is Indra...He who fixed fast and firm the earth that staggered, and set at rest the agitated mountains, Who measured out the air’s wide middle region and gave the heaven support, He, men, is Indra.”²⁵⁸

Often it is simply stated that Indra raised the sun: “Indra hath raised the Sun on high in heaven, that he may see afar; He burst the mountain for the kine.”²⁵⁹ The following passage is of similar import: “When thou hadst slain with might the dragon Vritra, thou, Indra, didst raise the Sun in heaven for all to see.”²⁶⁰ Here Griffith cites a gloss of Sayana, a celebrated commentator on the *Veda*: “Didst free the Sun which had been hidden by Vritra.”²⁶¹

Other passages hint at Indra’s participation in the separation of heaven and earth: “He stayed and held the heaven and earth asunder.”²⁶² This event is likewise said to have occurred shortly after his birth:

²⁵⁵IV:17:1

²⁵⁶II:12:7

²⁵⁷W. N. Brown, “The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda,” *J. of Am. Oriental Society* 62 (1942), p. 97.

²⁵⁸II:12:1-4

²⁵⁹I:7:2-3

²⁶⁰I:51:4

²⁶¹R. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda* (Delhi, 1973), p. 33.

²⁶²V:44:24

“Before the High God, at his birth, heaven trembled, earth, many floods and all the precipices. The Strong One bringeth nigh the Bull’s two parents.”²⁶³

Here Griffith adds: “The meaning of the second line is, Indra brings near, but holds apart, the heaven and the earth, the parents of the mighty Sun.”²⁶⁴

[Closely related to this act, it would appear, is Indra’s role in the spreading out of the earth. Again, the testimony on this subject is too extensive to quote in full:

“Thou, Indra, hast spread out the earth’s high ridges, and firmly fixed the region under heaven.”²⁶⁵

“He spread the wide earth out and firmly fixed it, smote with his thunderbolt and loosed the waters.”²⁶⁶

The spreading out of the earth is directly related to the release of the heavenly waters, once again compared to cattle:

“Unbarred the firm doors for the kine of Morning, and with all the Angirases, set free the cattle. Thou hast spread out wide earth, a mighty marvel, and, high thyself, propped lofty heaven, O Indra.”²⁶⁷

The heavenly cattle also figure prominently in the following hymn, which brings together in a single account most of the aforementioned themes:

“Thou hast established in her seat, O Indra, the level earth, vast, vigorous, unbounded. The Bull hath propped the heaven and air’s mid-region. By thee sent onward let the floods flow hither. He who withheld the kine, in silence yielded before thy blow, O Indra. He made paths easy to drive forth the cattle. Loud breathing praises helped the Much-invoked One. Indra alone filled full the earth and heaven, the Pair who meet together, rich in treasures. Surya transgresses not the ordered limits set daily by the Lord of the Tawny Coursers.”^{268]}

²⁶³IV:22:4

²⁶⁴R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

²⁶⁵I:62:5

²⁶⁶I:103:2

²⁶⁷V:17:6-7

²⁶⁸III:30:9-12

Indra's involvement in the ordering of heaven and earth would appear to cast him in the role of creator or demiurge. This aspect of Indra's mythos was duly emphasized by Brown:

"Most briefly he became lord of the cosmos. He released the Waters, generated the sun, the sky, the dawn or, as stated elsewhere, he and Soma made the dawn shine, led forth the sun with its light, supported the sky, spread out Mother Earth, having struck away Vritra from them. Or, again, having slain Vritra, he proceeded to creation. He is, therefore, called *visvakarman* "All-Maker, Creator" and lord over all creation."²⁶⁹

THE SOMA DRINKER

Indra was notorious for his thirst for Soma, and countless hymns allude to its immediate and dramatic influence upon the god.²⁷⁰ Under the influence of the Soma, it is said that Indra's body swelled to a gigantic size, filling heaven and earth. Consider here the following passage:

"High heaven unsupported in space he stablished: he filled the two worlds and the air's mid region. Earth he upheld, and gave it wide expansion. These things did Indra in the Soma's rapture. From front, as 'twere a house, he ruled and measured; pierced with his bolt the fountains of the rivers, And made them flow at ease by paths far-reaching, These things did Indra in the Soma's rapture."²⁷¹

According to a tradition found in the *Atharva Veda*, Indra's body "became a great mountain" upon consuming the Soma.²⁷²

Strangely enough, Indra seems to have developed this taste for Soma shortly after his birth:

"Many are Indra's nobly wrought achievements,...He beareth up this earth and heaven, and, doer of marvels, he begot the Sun and Morning. Herein, O Guileless One, is thy true greatness, that soon as born thou drankest up the Soma."²⁷³

²⁶⁹N. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 96. M. Bloomfield offered a similar interpretation in "The Interpretation of the Veda," in *Am. Jour. of Philology* 17 (1896), p. 434.

²⁷⁰As to the nature of the Soma, opinions vary enormously. Some see it as a climbing plant (*Sarcostema Viminalis* or *Asclepias Acida*), others an ambrosia-like herb, etc. In the *Rig Veda* it is explicitly identified with the milk of the celestial cows.

²⁷¹II:15:2-3

²⁷²9.4.3-6.

²⁷³III:32:8-9.

Indra's precocious taste for Soma is also apparent in the following passage: "Even from his birth-time Indra conquered Tvaster, bore off the Soma and in beakers drank it."²⁷⁴ A similar passage is the following:

"The day when thou wast born thou, fain to taste it, drankest the plant's milk which the mountains nourish. That milk thy Mother first, the Dame who bare thee, poured for thee in thy mighty Father's dwelling."²⁷⁵

It was while under the influence of Soma that Indra accomplished his greatest deeds. The following passage is typical of this theme:

"Cheered by this meath Indra, whose hand wields thunder, rent piecemeal Ahi who barred up the waters, So that the quickening currents of the rivers flowed forth like birds unto their resting-places. Indra, this Mighty One, the Dragon's slayer, sent forth the flood of waters to the ocean. He gave the Sun his life, he found the cattle, and with the night the works of day were completed."²⁷⁶

Macdonell, among others, emphasized the Soma's importance in the traditions surrounding Indra:

"Soma is sometimes said to stimulate Indra to perform great cosmic actions such as supporting earth and sky or spreading out the earth. But it characteristically exhilarates him to carry out his warlike deeds, the slaughter of the dragon or Vritra or the conquest of foes. So essential is Soma to Indra that his mother gave it to him or he drank it on the very day of his birth."²⁷⁷

Alas, the influence of the Soma was not always positive in nature. Thus it is elsewhere reported to have driven Indra to parricide.²⁷⁸

SOLAR HERO OR STORM GOD?

Having recounted the most celebrated deeds of Indra, the question arises as to their ultimate origin and significance? Certainly there are some bizarre images involved. A hero who upon birth assumes a gigantic form; an infant who rescues the gods by waging battle with a sun-eclipsing dragon; a hero who pillars up heaven; etc.

²⁷⁴III:48:4

²⁷⁵III:48:2 This tradition might be compared to Heracles' drinking the milk of Hera.

²⁷⁶II:19:3

²⁷⁷A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (New York, 1974), p. 56.

²⁷⁸*Rig Veda* 4:18:12 See also the discussion in V. Ions, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Were it not that such traditions conform to a widespread pattern associated with the birth of the warrior-hero, one might be tempted to regard them as the product of unbridled fantasy.

The most common interpretation of Indra's mythology would make of it a nature-allegory, with the war-god being regarded as a personification of the Sun, storm, or some other aspect of the physical world. Indra's combat with and victory over Vritra, according to the first view, signifies the Sun's victorious emergence from the all-encompassing darkness of night. This view is virtually synonymous with the name of F. Max Muller, Vedic scholar and outstanding pioneer of comparative mythology.²⁷⁹

Muller's hypothesis is distinguished by the attempt to consider the Indra-cycle as a unified tradition, rather than as a conglomeration of isolated and originally unconnected episodes, each with varying explanations. Alas, Muller's valiant attempt to accommodate each aspect of Indra's myth by means of solar allegory was not always convincing. Muller would have the cows delivered by Indra signify the clouds "which, from their heavy udders, send down refreshing and fertilizing rain or dew upon the parched earth."²⁸⁰ Hence Indra's intimate association with fertility and fertilizing rains. Throughout the *Veda*, however, the cows themselves are intimately associated with the coming of light and dawn, a strange situation indeed if clouds were the original source of the bovine imagery.

If Muller's solar-hero hypothesis represents the most ambitious attempt to accommodate Indra's mythology, it was neither the first nor the last such attempt.²⁸¹ Others have seen in Indra a personification of the atmosphere—specifically the region between heaven and earth. This was the opinion of Griffith, for example:

"He is the God who reigns over the intermediate region or atmosphere; he fights against and conquers with his thunderbolt the demons of drought and darkness, and is in general the type of noble heroism."²⁸²

²⁷⁹M. Muller, *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology, and Religion* (London, 1881), pp. 479, 492.

²⁸⁰M. Muller, *Comparative Mythology* (New York, 1977), p. 121.

²⁸¹For a survey of the various interpretations, see the discussion in H. Oldenberg, *The Religion of the Veda* (Delhi, 1988), pp. 74-78.

²⁸²R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 2. See also J. Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion* (1961), pp. 123-124.

Yet another hypothesis sees in Indra a personification of the thunderstorm, the god's defeat of Vritra symbolizing rain's overcoming the demon of drought.²⁸³ A. Keith may be cited as a leading proponent of this viewpoint:

"It is almost certain that in Indra we must see a storm-god, and that his exploit of defeating Vritra is a picture of the bursting forth of the rain from the clouds at the oncoming of the rainy season, when all the earth is parched, and when man and nature alike are eager for the breaking of the drought. The tremendous storms which mark the first fall of the rain are generally recognized as a most fitting source for the conception of the god, while the mountains cleft and the cows won are the clouds viewed from different standpoints. But Indra appears also as winning the sun, a trait representing the clearing away of the clouds from the sun after the thunderstorm, with which has been confused or united the idea of the recovery of the sun at dawn from the darkness of night."²⁸⁴

As is apparent from Keith's discussion, it is difficult to account for the entire range of Indra's mythos by sole recourse to the imagery of the thunderstorm. Satisfactory in some areas, it is superficial or entirely inapplicable in others.

Macdonell ran into a similar impasse. He would interpret the myth of Indra's birth from the side of Prithivi as a reference to lightning: "This trait may possibly be derived from the notion of lightning breaking from the side of the storm-cloud."²⁸⁵ The myth of Indra's separation of heaven and earth, however, Macdonell would trace to the illuminating effects of light: "Possibly the effect of light extending the range of vision and seeming to separate heaven and earth apparently pressed together by darkness, may have been the starting point of such conceptions."²⁸⁶

Apart from the various "meteorological" interpretations, perhaps the most popular interpretation of Indra's mythology is the socio-cultural approach spawned by the work of Georges Dumezil, the leading practitioner of comparative mythology in recent years. Dumezil argued that ancient Indo-European society was distinguished by a tripartite structure—consisting of sovereign, warrior, and food-producing castes

²⁸³E. Fay, "The Aryan God of Lightning," *Jour. of Philology* 17:1 (1895), p. 11. See also A. Keith, "Iranian Mythology" in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (Boston, 1917), pp. 264-265.

²⁸⁴A. Keith, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁸⁵A. Macdonell, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

²⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 62.

respectively—and that this tripartite structure was reflected in the myths and rituals of various Indo-European peoples. Indra, according to the thesis of Dumezil, is a personification of the warrior function and as such he should be considered the Indian homologue to the Greek Ares and Latin Mars.²⁸⁷

As it turns out, there is some justification for each of the foregoing interpretations of Indra's mythology. That Indra represents some form of celestial power seems obvious. How else is it possible to understand the numerous references to Indra filling all of heaven or freeing the sun? The question, however, is which celestial power best suits the nature of Indra?

With regards to Muller's celebrated and much maligned solar-hypothesis, it must be concluded that it fails to provide a satisfactory explanation of the god's mythus despite the fact that there is a modicum of evidence for a solar Indra in the Vedic texts. For example, several passages identify Indra and Surya.²⁸⁸ It is generally agreed, however, that these passages occur in relatively late hymns and reflect the theoretical redactions of Vedic scribes; they would thus appear to offer little insight into the origins of Indra.

Muller's hypothesis, moreover, would appear to be directly contradicted by the numerous passages in the *Veda* which represent Indra as delivering the sun. Such traditions seem to confirm that Indra and the Sun (Surya) are two separate and independent entities. The same argument applies with respect to Indra's role in the support of the Sun. And these passages, needless to say, are of much greater antiquity than those which offer the equation of Indra and Surya (the situation is exactly analogous to that surrounding the Greek Apollo, who also became identified with the Sun in later times, but who originally had nothing to do with the solar orb).

With regards to the interpretation of Indra as the power inherent in the thunderstorm, here too it must be admitted that meteorological imagery pervades the mythus of Indra. Even Dumezil acknowledged this point:

²⁸⁷G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1970), pp. 207-209.

²⁸⁸4:26:1 See here the discussion in A. Macdonell, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

“It is the destiny of the warrior gods, patterned on the terrestrial warriors, to be storm gods as well...Thor, the ‘thunder,’ with his hammer, like Indra with his thunderbolt, has obvious nature-god significance.”²⁸⁹

Why a god patterned after a social caste would come to take on features of the natural world is not obvious and was left unanswered by Dumézil.²⁹⁰

Yet the question is not whether Indra bears the characteristics of gods commonly regarded as storm gods. That he does is obvious to all. The question, rather, is whether these supposed storm gods have any relation to modern conceptions of the storm or whether they trace instead to some more formidable celestial power? As we will attempt to demonstrate, the evidence favors the latter hypothesis. At this point it is sufficient to note that the interpretation of Indra as the thunderstorm fares no better than the solar hypothesis, utterly failing to account for the mythos of the great warrior god. How is it possible to conceive of a thunderstorm as supporting the sun, for example? From whence derives the tradition of the infant Indra’s precocious growth?

There can be little doubt, finally, that Indra represents the Vedic god of war. Yet this need not be seen as offering support for Dumézil’s tripartite hypothesis, for Indra’s relation to the warrior function is self-evident and might be accommodated by many different theories. It is well-known that numerous ancient cultures have analogous war-gods, despite the fact that many of these cultures are non-Indo-European in origin. Thus it may well be that some more universal explanation is required to account for Indra’s mythos.

There are various other problems with Dumézil’s tripartite hypothesis. Burkert, for example, observes that the expected tripartite structure is scarcely to be found in Greek tradition, despite the fact that Greek myth is the best documented of the Indo-European races.²⁹¹ Dumézil’s leading disciple, C. Littleton, concedes that aside from the figure of Heracles, Greek myth represents “an otherwise rather barren field from Dumézil’s point of view.”²⁹² Problems with Dumézil’s tripartite thesis, however, do

²⁸⁹G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 160.

²⁹⁰J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, 1989), p. 60 likewise speaks of a coalescence of Indra’s warlike and atmospheric figurations.

²⁹¹W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 18.

²⁹²C. S. Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 125. Littleton elsewhere attempts to explain away the absence of a clear tripartite structure in Greece as a result of a merging of

not weaken the strength of his identification of Indra as the Indian homologue of the Greek Ares and Latin Mars, based as it is on solid comparative research.²⁹³ Indeed it is my opinion that this identification offers the most promising base upon which to launch a new interpretation of the Indian god's mythology.

THE PLANET MARS

Throughout his vast writings on the subject of comparative mythology, Dumezil never once seriously considered the possibility that the gods of the warrior function—Ares, Mars, and Indra—might have a celestial component.²⁹⁴ This is hardly to be wondered at given the fact that few other scholars of the twentieth century have been any more open-minded towards this possibility; influenced in this opinion, perhaps, by the disrepute associated with the solar-school of Muller and his followers.²⁹⁵ Yet the fact remains that Ares and Mars were explicitly identified with the planet Mars by their respective peoples.²⁹⁶ Ancient peoples from Babylon to China to the New World likewise regarded the red planet as embodying the warrior-function.

Consider also the case of Heracles. As a student of comparative mythology, Dumezil could not help but recognize the striking parallels which exist between Indra and Heracles.²⁹⁷ Indeed, Dumezil devoted the better part of two books to the

their traditions with those of pre-Indo-European peoples. See "Georges Dumezil and the Rebirth of the Genetic Model: an Anthropological Appreciation," in G. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1974), p. 177.

²⁹³Other scholars have noticed the resemblance of Indra with Mars and Ares, of course. See E. Fay, "The Aryan God of Lightning," *Jour. of Philology* 17:1 (1895), p. 14; and G. R. Levy, *The Sword from the Rock* (New York, 1953), pp. 16, 93.

²⁹⁴Writing of the religion of the Romans, Dumezil observed: "The sun and the moon have scarcely any role in their religion, while the stars have none at all, nor the firmament." *Archaic Roman Religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 177. Elsewhere, p. 209, Dumezil remarks of Mars' religion that: "He does not have a naturalistic aspect."

²⁹⁵See the remarks of G. Larson in *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 3-4. Littleton, *op. cit.*, p. 2, suggests that the general failure of modern scholars to accept the merits of comparative mythology traces to the excesses of Muller's solar interpretation. In the last century it was common to seek a celestial component for Indra's cult. See E. Moor, *Hindu Pantheon* (London, 1810), p. 260.

²⁹⁶Plato, *Epinomis* 987c.

²⁹⁷The great classicist Wilamowitz had earlier called attention to the resemblance between Heracles and Indra, as did L. Schröder, but it was the groundbreaking article of F. Schröder—"Indra, Thor und Herakles," *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 76 (1957), pp. 1-41—that fully documented the relationship. The latter scholar was particularly important with regard to the development of Dumezil's views.

documentation of such parallels.²⁹⁸ Here too, however, Dumézil ignored the identification of Heracles with the planet Mars. If this identification is valid—and we have found no reason to question it—the possibility arises that Indra likewise bore some relation to the red planet.

VERETHRAGNA AND VAHAGN

It has been known for some time, thanks to the pioneering researches of Benveniste and Renou, that Indra's chief epithet—*Vritrahan*, “smasher of resistance”—finds an exact counterpart in Iranian traditions surrounding the hero Thraetona, who was known by the epithet of *Verethragna*.²⁹⁹ Regarded by many as the Avestan Heracles, Thraetona received this epithet by virtue of his defeat of the dragon Azi Dahaka.³⁰⁰

That various sacred traditions of the Indians and Iranians go back to a common source is well-known. The numerous correspondences between Indra and Thraetona are a case in point. Vritra's epithet *Ahi* (“serpent”) is cognate with Azi, the name of the Iranian dragon; while Indra's *vajra* is cognate with *vazra*, the club-like weapon of the Iranian hero. Here Greenebaum observes: “These linguistic similarities, together with the epithets involved, and the similarity in themes would seem to indicate that a tradition of the slaying of Vritra Azhi Dasa was common to Indic and Iranian myths.”³⁰¹

Who or what, then, was Verethragna? In texts dating to Sassanid times (AD 226-640), Verethragna stands as a name for the planet Mars.³⁰² That the identification of the Iranian god and the red planet goes back to still more ancient times was maintained by B. L. van der Waerden:

²⁹⁸G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970); *The Stakes of the Warrior* (Berkeley, 1983). Here Dumézil was influenced by the masterful analysis of Schröder, who showed that Heracles and Indra shared numerous attributes in common. For our discussion here it is enough to note that Schröder documented that both shared the following motifs in common: dragon-slayer, prolific appetite, intimately associated with the support of heaven, sinner, cross-dresser, womanizer, etc.

²⁹⁹E. Benveniste & L. Renou, *Vritra et Vrthragna* (1935). See the discussion in G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 115-138. See also S. Greenebaum, “Vritrahan-Verethragna: Indian and Iran,” in G. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 93-97.

³⁰⁰*Ibid.*, p. 95.

³⁰¹*Ibid.*, p. 96.

“The identification of the planets with great gods must be a relict from an earlier period...As we have seen, the identification of planets with gods is fundamental for horoscopic astrology. Now this kind of astrology originated in the Achaemenid period (539-331 B.C.) and spread over the whole ancient world during the Hellenistic period (after 330 B.C.). Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that the identification of planets with Persian gods took place during the Achaemenid or early Hellenistic period.”³⁰³

The Iranian Verethragna finds a close homologue in the Armenian hero Vahagn (Vahagn is apparently the Armenian transcription of the Parthian name Verethragna), of whom little is known apart from the fact that he too was renowned as a dragon-slayer.³⁰⁴ All that remains are a few fragments telling of his tumultuous birth as reported by Moses of Chorene, the leading historian of Armenian lore:

“Heaven and earth were in travail, the purple sea was in travail; a red reed had its birth in the seas, from the stems of the reed came forth smoke, from the stems of the reed came forth a flame, and from the flame sprang a young man; this youth had fiery hair, also a beard of flame, and his eyes were suns.”³⁰⁵

As Dumézil points out, this fascinating vignette compares well with several incidents in Indra’s career. Indra too, it will be remembered, had first sprang forth under similar conditions of universal distress:

“Indra, endowed with all heroic valor. Then up he sprang himself, assumed his vesture, and filled, as soon as born, the earth and heaven.”³⁰⁶

Vahagn’s residence within the reed-stem Dumézil would compare to an episode in the *Mahabharata*. There Indra is represented as hiding in a lotus stalk upon assuming a minute form at the time of his battle with the dragon.³⁰⁷ With regards to the traditions surrounding Vahagn and Indra, Dumézil wrote:

³⁰²B. L. van der Waerden, *Science Awakening II: The Birth of Astronomy* (Leiden, 1974), p. 187.

³⁰³*Ibid.*, p. 188. There van der Waerden cites the Persian scholar Duchesne-Guillemin. As this author points out, the identification of Verethragna and Mars is found already in Antiochus (c. 62. B.C.).

³⁰⁴His most common title is *Vishapakhagh*, “Reaper of Dragons.” On this figure, see G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 122. See also A. Carnoy, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

³⁰⁵Moses of Chorene, *History of the Armenians* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 123. The first scholar to make this comparison appears to have been F. Schröder, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³⁰⁶*Rig Veda* IV:18:5

³⁰⁷G. Dumézil, *op. cit.* pp. 124-125.

“Not only is there a parallel in events, but also a coincidence in name: these two scenes, so close in their overall plans, are bound up with the Armenian and Indian forms of one and the same figure. The most straightforward attitude, the one most respectful of the materials, is not to assume the convergence of two late and independent fantasies; rather it is to suppose that Iranicized Armenia has transmitted to us a form of Verethragna, still closely resembling his Indo-Iranian prototype which...was enabled to survive for a long time in more than one part of Iran, just as the *itihasa* [a sacred tradition], the source for the epic traditions, may have conserved the same material in India, outside the Vedic literature.”³⁰⁸

Dumezil’s recognition of Indra and Vahagn as mythical homologues has generally gained acceptance. Lincoln summarized the current status of debate as follows:

“The first point which we must note is, as has long been known, the name Vahagn is a loan word into Armenian and is derived from Avestan Verethragna (=Skt. Vritrahan). The story of his birth from a flaming reed has been connected with an Indian *itihasa* tradition telling of the reenergizing of Indra. Thus we are virtually certain that Vahagn is a dependent variant of the Indo-Iranian warrior-god, who was known as both *Vrtraghna, ‘smasher of resistance,’ and *Indra, ‘the manly, the strong.’”³⁰⁹

As with the affinity of Vahagn and Indra, the resemblance between Vahagn and Heracles has long been recognized.³¹⁰ Thus, Moses of Chorene followed up his brief account of the hero’s birth with the observation:

“All sing of this one, I have heard it with my own ears; they thus recount in song along with cymbals, his battle with the dragon and his victory, and they sing of him in every way as of the heroic deeds of Hercules.”³¹¹

In lieu of Vahagn’s resemblance to both Heracles and Verethragna, it comes as no surprise to find that he, too, was identified with the planet Mars.³¹² The explicit identification of these three heroes with Mars must command our attention. For even if it be granted that each of these identifications traces to a common astrological

³⁰⁸*Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁰⁹B. Lincoln, “The Indo-European Cattle-Raiding Myth,” *History of Religions* 16:1 (1976), pp. 50-51.

³¹⁰“Armenian authors regularly translate Heracles as Vahagn.” So wrote B. L. van der Waerden, *Science Awakening II: The Birth of Astronomy* (Leiden, 1974), p. 190.

³¹¹Moses of Chorene, *History of the Armenians* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 123. B. Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

³¹²B. L. van der Waerden, *Science Awakening II: The Birth of Astronomy* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 187-190.

system—which is possible—the decisive point remains that three different cultures saw fit to identify their favorite hero with the red planet.

The ramifications of these identifications for an analysis of Indra's mythos would seem obvious. Yet if we are to trace the mythology of the Vedic war-god to ancient beliefs associated with the planet Mars, it must be expected that this identification will enable us to explain various aspects of the god's cult, such as his role in the support of heaven, the ability to assume a gigantic form, his reputation as a dragon-slayer, etc.

THE WORLD PILLAR

In seeking an explanation of Indra's intimate association with the support of heaven, several scholars have speculated that ancient conceptions of the World Pillar pervade this aspect of his mythology.³¹³ One of the most common themes in ancient cosmogony, the World Pillar—in addition to supporting heaven—was believed to connect the Earth with the kingdom of the gods, offering at the same time a means of communication and travel between the various worlds. As to the objective reference of this Pillar, scholars typically point to the North celestial axis. Holmberg summarized this view as follows:

“The regular diurnal movement of the stars round an axis at the North Star, the reasons for which neverending rotation were earlier unknown, gave birth to an idea that their apparent center of the universe was formed by some object which could be represented in concrete forms, and which was, in addition, believed to support the roof of the sky.”³¹⁴

The World Pillar was associated with various symbolic forms by the ancient skywatchers, one of the most common of which was that of the Cosmic Mountain. Here the Hindu mount Meru offers a classic example: In addition to forming the support of heaven, Meru is said to have stood at the celestial axis, above which appeared the Pole Star.³¹⁵ Elsewhere, however, Meru was invoked as the support of the sun.³¹⁶ Indeed, it was said that the sun both rose and set upon Meru.³¹⁷

³¹³F. Schröder, “Indra, Thor und Herakles,” *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 76 (1957), pp. 5-7.

³¹⁴U. Holmberg, *Finno-Ugric Mythology* (Boston, 1927), p. 333.

³¹⁵I. Mabbett, “The Symbolism of Mount Meru,” *History of Religions* (1983), p. 69.

³¹⁶*Epigraphica Indica*, 12:203 Cited in I. Mabbett, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

Analogous traditions surround *Mashu*, the Akkadian version of the Cosmic Mountain. Thus, in the *Gilgamesh Epic* it was claimed of this mountain that it presided over the rising and setting of the sun:

“The name of the mountain is Mashu...Which every day keeps watch over the rising and setting of the sun, Whose peaks reach as high as the ‘banks of heaven’, And whose breast reaches down to the underworld.”³¹⁸

Yet under the current arrangement of the solar system, it is impossible for the Sun to both rise and set over the same terrestrial mountain. Hence the anomaly presented by the universal theme of the Cosmic Mountain upon which the ancient sun-god was wont to “rise” and “set,” one of many clues that the ancients were describing a cosmos radically different from the one known to modern scholars.

Other symbolic forms associated with the World Pillar include the World Tree or Celestial Spring. Eliade offered the following summary of this symbolism:

“The symbolism of the World Tree is complementary to that of the Central Mountain. Sometimes the two symbols coincide; usually they complement each other. But both are merely more developed mythical formulations of the Cosmic Axis (World Pillar, etc.).”³¹⁹

It is significant to find that Indra—in addition to being invoked as the support of heaven—is variously invoked in the forms of a tree, spring³²⁰, and mountain.³²¹ In ancient ritual, for example, the god was specifically identified with a May-pole like tree—the Indra-tree.³²² The embodiment of Indra in a pole-like form is also apparent in the following passage from the *Rig Veda*: “The priests have raised thee up on high,

³¹⁷*Aitareya Brahmana* 14:6:44 I. Mabbett, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

³¹⁸A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1970), p. 65.

³¹⁹M. Eliade, *Myths, Rites, and Symbols* (New York, 1975), p. 380.

³²⁰Vedic hymns compare Indra to a spring: “We will pour Indra forth as ‘twere a spring of wealth.” II:16:7. Indra is elsewhere said to have dwelt in a heavenly well of honey. See A. Keith, “Iranian Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (Boston, 1917), p. 29. Note also that Verethragna is associated with a fountain of manliness in Iranian tradition. See F. Muller, *The Zend-Avesta* (New York, 1898), pp. 238-239.

³²¹In the *Rig Veda* Indra is addressed as “Mount Indra.” I:121:12 This passage Gonda would compare to AVS 6, 87, 2: “Be thou just here; do not move away, like a mountain not unsteady; O Indra, stand thou fixed just here; here do thou maintain royalty.” Also relevant here is the tradition found in the *Atharva Veda*, quoted earlier, in which it is said that upon drinking Soma, Indra’s body became “like unto a mountain.” See N. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

O Satakratu, like a pole.”³²³ Here Gonda observes: “The pole is explicitly identified with Indra himself who in one of the earliest references to these ceremonies (*MBH* 1, 57, 22ff.) is said to have promised his worshippers aid and support.”³²⁴

In a discussion of the religious significance of Indra’s pole/tree, Gonda cautioned that its mythical prototype was in heaven: “It should however be borne in mind that the Indra tree like the sacrificial post (*yupa*) and similar stakes and other objects might be considered a representative of the great cosmic tree, and of the *axis mundi*.”³²⁵ Thus, whether he is embodied in the Indra-tree or as the Atlas-like supporter of heaven, Indra cannot be divorced from ancient conceptions of the World Pillar (*axis mundi*).

In lieu of our finding that Indra’s homologues Verethragna and Vahagn were each identified with the planet Mars, it is significant to find that the red planet itself has been linked to ancient conceptions of the World Pillar by scholars investigating the origins of sacred symbols. Thus, in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Cirlot reports that: “The Tree of Life, when it rises no higher than the mountain of Mars...is regarded as a pillar supporting heaven.”³²⁶

Additional support for Cirlot’s finding comes from the fact that many of the ancient war-gods identified with Mars are explicitly associated with a sacred mountain, tree, or spring identifiable with the World Pillar.³²⁷ The Latin war-god Mars, for example, was identified with the Saxon god Irmin who, under the name of Irminsul, was worshipped as the universal column.³²⁸

Analogous traditions surround Nergal. The epithet *Lugal-an-za-gar*, “Lord of the pillar,” would appear to have reference to the war-god’s connection to the World

³²²F. Schröder, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³²³I:10:1

³²⁴J. Gonda, “The Indra Festival According to the Atharvavedins,” *JAOS* 87 (1967), p. 414.

³²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 417. There Gonda adds: “The mythical prototype of the *Indradhvaja* was in heaven.”

³²⁶J. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York, 1962), p. 330.

³²⁷See the discussion in E. Cochrane, “The Spring of Ares,” *Kronos* XI:3 (1986), pp. 15-21.

³²⁸E. Polome, “Some Thoughts on the Methodology of Comparative Religion, With Special Focus on Indo-European,” in *Essays in Memory of Karl Kerényi* (Washington, D.C., 1984), p. 16. See also H.R. Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Syracuse, 1988), pp. 21-24. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 1 (Gloucester, 1976), pp. 115-119.

Pillar.³²⁹ Another epithet—*Meslamtae*—thought to signify “he who issues forth from the Meshu-tree,” confirms that the planet-god bore an intimate relation to the World Tree (Meshu), described as follows in *The Poem of Erra*: “That pure tree...whose roots reached as deep down as the bottom of the underworld...whose top reached as high as the sky of Anum.”³³⁰ Like the Mashu-mountain, the Meshu-tree extends from the depths of the underworld to the heights of heaven.

Nergal is elsewhere associated with the Cosmic Mountain. Thus, a Sumerian hymn relates that Nergal was given the mountain of heaven and earth on the day of his birth to serve as his special province.³³¹ Elsewhere it is said that Nergal/Mars bore a marked tendency to “rise in the mountain where the sun rises.”³³² [In a fragmentary hymn of uncertain date, Nergal is said to have once replaced An and assumed the reign of heaven after defeating agents of chaos upon the mountain associated with the rising of the sun.³³³]

Under the current arrangement of the solar system, however, Mars cannot be said to rise in the East with the Sun. Indeed, the Sun and Mars are never visible together in the sky at any one time during the latter’s close proximity to the Sun. Rather, Mars only appears *after* the Sun has gone down. When Mars does appear in the East, it is always faint and typically invisible, being then on the other side of the Sun and thus hundreds of millions of miles away.³³⁴

Nergal is also associated with the site of the sun’s disappearance. Witness the epithet *Lugal-ki-du-Bu-a*: “king of the site of the Sun-set.”³³⁵ A closely related

³²⁹K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 390.

³³⁰L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (Malibu, 1977), p. 32. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 17.

³³¹A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), pp. 51, 88. The name of the mountain in question is ‘ur-sag-an-ki-bi-da. For the identification of this mount with the Cosmic Mountain, see the discussion in S. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia, 1944), p. 39; F. Bruschweiler, *INANNA. La deesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumerienne* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 84-86.

³³²A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 106.

³³³W. Hallo & J van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 65.

³³⁴J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, “Literary and Astronomical Evidence for a Total Eclipse of the Sun Observed in Ancient Ugarit on 3 May 1375 B. C.,” *BSOAS* 33 (1970), pp. 468-469 write: “When Mars is near the sun, it is faint and is never visible until about half an hour after sunset.”

³³⁵K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 390.

epithet is *Lugul-du-Bu-a*, “king who effects the Sunset.”³³⁶ What, if anything, does the planet Mars have to do with site of the sunset? If the mountain associated with the sun’s rising was the same as that associated with the sun’s descent—as the ancient texts relate in no uncertain terms—it stands to reason that Mars would be associated with both if with either one.

Two questions confront us at this point. How did the planet Mars come to be associated with ancient conceptions of the World Pillar? And, granted that it did, how does that finding contribute to our understanding of the mythology of Indra?

THE POLAR CONFIGURATION

In *Worlds in Collision*, Immanuel Velikovsky argued that the planets only recently settled into their current orbits, and that Venus, Mars, and Saturn were involved in spectacular cataclysms witnessed by ancient man the world over, who subsequently commemorated the terrifying events in countless myths and rituals. In that bold and highly controversial book, Velikovsky set the stage for a revolution in comparative mythology by suggesting that universally recurring mythical images—such as the war-god, fire-breathing dragon, and witch—reflect ancient man’s attempt to commemorate terrifying cataclysms associated with planetary agents.

It was while researching *Worlds in Collision* that Velikovsky discovered that the planet Saturn played a prominent role in ancient mythology, a puzzling fact given its present modest appearance. This finding has since received substantial support from the extensive researches of Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, who likewise found the planet Saturn to be a central figure in ancient mythology and religion.³³⁷ While the authors of *Hamlet’s Mill* favored a uniformitarian explanation of Saturn’s prominence, explaining the cataclysmic imagery in ancient myth as a reflection of the ancients’ preoccupation with the phenomena associated with precession of the equinoxes, Velikovsky explained Saturn’s mythical status by speculating that the Earth had once moved in close proximity to the gas giant, with Saturn dominating the skies.³³⁸

³³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 390.

³³⁷G. Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet’s Mill* (Boston, 1977).

³³⁸See the discussion in I. Velikovsky, *Mankind in Amnesia* (New York, 1982), pp. 97-100.

Following in the footsteps of Velikovsky, various researchers began to lay the foundation for a radical reconstruction of the recent history of the solar system, one in which Saturn assumed an all-important role.³³⁹ According to the thesis offered by David Talbott, the planet Saturn once loomed large in the north polar skies, thereby forming the inspiration for the universal belief in a Golden Age whereby the gods lived close in view. During the period in question, Saturn and the Earth apparently shared a common axis of rotation, with the result that Saturn remained fixed in the sky. As Talbott has shown, Saturn was illuminated in such a way by the sun that it displayed a crescent, the latter of which appeared to circle around Saturn with the revolution of the Earth about its axis. The various phases of Saturn's crescent formed the visual, objective basis for the original cycle of the ancient day.³⁴⁰

In recent years it has become apparent that other planets also participated in the configuration associated with Saturn.³⁴¹ According to the reconstruction offered by Talbott and myself, the planets Mars and Venus originally appeared in close proximity to Saturn, apparently sharing a common axis of rotation together with the Earth. As the Earth-bound observer looked upwards, he saw a spectacular image—Saturn dominating the sky, with the much smaller Venus and Mars set within it like two concentric circles (see Diagram). Neolithic rock art, in fact, records just such an image, commonly interpreted as the ancient sun-god.³⁴²

As this planetary configuration evolved through time, the positions of the respective planets were subject to substantial fluctuation. The ebb and flow in the positions of the various planets along and about the axis constitutes a vital chapter in the history of the gods and ultimately provided a primary source of inspiration for the world's mythical themes. Mars, for example, appeared early on to be in the center of Saturn, from which point it later descended to a position visually beneath Saturn. As Mars descended from Saturn/Venus, it became visibly larger, at the same time losing

³³⁹D. Talbott, *The Saturn Myth* (New York, 1980); and D. Cardona, "The Sun of Night," *Kronos* III:1 (Fall 1977); "The Mystery of the Pleiades," *Kronos* III:4 (Summer 1978). See also the many articles by these two writers in *Kronos* and *Aeon*.

³⁴⁰D. Talbott, "The Ship of Heaven," *Aeon* 1:3 (1988), pp. 57-96.

³⁴¹E. Cochrane, "The Spring of Ares," *Kronos* XI:3 (Summer 1986), pp. 15-21; D. Talbott, "On Models and Scenarios," *Aeon* I:4 (1988), pp. 5-15.

a significant portion of its atmosphere under the influence of the Earth's gravitational field. It was this ethereal debris strung out between Mars and Earth, apparently, which gave rise to the spectacular apparition of a fiery pillar spanning the heavens (see Diagram). Significantly, it is common to find the "sun-god" set atop a pillar-like apparition in ancient rock art (see Diagram/Appendix).

INDRA'S INFANCY

If we avail ourselves of this simple outline, daily evolving and physically improbable though it may appear at first sight, the mythology of Indra begins to unravel and signs abound that its ultimate decipherment may be within view. The tumultuous occasion commemorated in the myth of Indra's birth had its objective reference in the descent of Mars from the near vicinity of Saturn along the axis towards Earth.³⁴³ Upon its initial displacement from Saturn/Venus, Mars appears to have moved perilously close to the Earth, looming large in the turbulent skies overhead (see diagram). Recall again the Vedic description of Indra's epiphany: "Indra, endowed with all heroic valor. Then up he sprang himself, assumed his vesture, and filled, as soon as born, the earth and heaven."³⁴⁴

Indra's ability to assume a gigantic form is a decided point of emphasis in the Vedic hymns, more than one scholar calling attention to the prominent role of the root *vrddh*, "to increase, or swell," in his mythus.³⁴⁵ A stock epithet of the god—*pravrrddha*—emphasizes this ability to swell, signifying "swollen, enlarged, expanded, increased, violent."³⁴⁶

Indra's propensity for swelling, according to the thesis offered here, refers to the simple fact that the planet Mars appeared to increase in size or "swell" as it moved towards Earth along the shared polar axis.³⁴⁷ Such a scenario would present a

³⁴²See the extensive discussion in E. Cochrane, "Suns and Planets in Neolithic Art," *Aeon* III:2 (1993), pp. 51-63.

³⁴³D. Talbott, "Mother Goddess and Warrior-Hero," *Aeon* I:5 (1988), pp. 47-54; D. Talbott, "Servant of the Sun God," *Aeon* II:1 (1989), pp. 37-52.

³⁴⁴IV:18:5

³⁴⁵See G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 126, who cites Renou and Bergaigne.

³⁴⁶M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 644.

³⁴⁷Witness the Polynesian name for the planet Mars: *Horo-pukipuku*, "Quick-swelling." See R. Williamson, *Religion and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1933), p. 194.

dramatic spectacle to Earthly skywatchers, if true. It is from this vantage point, perhaps, that we are to interpret the Vedic reference to Indra's precocious growth to the point where his body obscured the lights of heaven: "He filled the earthly atmosphere and pressed against the lights of heaven."³⁴⁸

Numerous other passages in the *Rig Veda* reiterate that Indra's gargantuan form dominated the skies, extending from heaven to earth: "The heaven itself attained not to thy greatness when with one hip of thine the earth was shadowed."³⁴⁹ Griffith compares this passage to another in which Indra announces: "One side of me is in the sky, and I have drawn the other down."³⁵⁰ A similar scenario is described in hymn I:103:1, which likewise places a part of Indra in heaven and the other part on earth. Here Gonda points out that, "both parts combine so as to form a *ketu* (which may mean 'ensign', but also 'an unusual phenomenon such as a comet or meteor')."³⁵¹

If we take as our point of reference the image presented in Diagram X, it can be seen that as Mars descended along the shared axis towards the Earth it swelled to the point at which it dominated the sky. As Mars neared the Earth, its atmosphere and any free-floating asteroidal debris flowed along the shared polar axis (perhaps under the influence of the Earth's gravitational field), producing a pillar-like apparition distended from Mars. The unusual apparition associated with Indra's *ketu*, quite possibly, had reference to the fiery comet-like train of debris which came to form the World Pillar, thus uniting, as it were, heaven and earth.

It was during this particular phase of the configuration's history that Mars appeared as a towering giant or pillar supporting heaven. Recall again the Vedic description of Indra's epiphany:

"He who, just born, chief God of lofty spirit by power and might became the God's protector...He who fixed fast and firm the earth that staggered, and set at rest the agitated mountains, Who measured out the air's wide middle region and gave the heaven support, He, men, is Indra."³⁵²

A comparable passage is the following:

³⁴⁸I:81:5

³⁴⁹III:32:11-12

³⁵⁰R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 178, with reference to X:119:11

³⁵¹J. Gonda, *The Indra Hymns of the Rg Veda* (Leiden, 1989), p. 17.

“The hero who in the battles girded up his body, he placed, powerfully, heaven on his head.”³⁵³

Here Indra appears as a sort of Vedic Atlas, supporting heaven on his head. Of Atlas, Hesiod wrote that he “supports the broad sky of mighty necessity at the edge of the earth near the clear-voiced Hesperides, supporting it with his head and wearying hands.”³⁵⁴ Aeschylus described him in similar fashion, preserving the intimate relation between the strong-armed hero and the World Pillar: “He in the far western ways stands bearing on his shoulders the mighty pillar of earth and sky.”³⁵⁵

It is the Egyptian god Shu, however, who offers the most complete portrait of the heaven bearer. Like Atlas, Shu was commonly depicted supporting heaven on his shoulders (See figure X).³⁵⁶ Although Shu formed a prominent fixture in ancient Egyptian cosmology, the objective reference behind the god has long puzzled scholars of Egyptian religion. Thus, Faulkner writes: “Shu is a deity about whom the standard works on Egyptian religion have comparatively little to say.”³⁵⁷

Scholars have typically viewed Shu as a personification of the empty space in the atmosphere—the “void” or “air”.³⁵⁸ It can be shown, however, that few if any of Shu’s characteristics in ancient Egyptian religion are consistent with this interpretation. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that Shu is to be identified with the planet Mars, as Talbott and I have proposed.³⁵⁹ Thus it is that the *Coffin Texts*

³⁵²II:12:1-4

³⁵³II:17:2

³⁵⁴Hesiod, *Theogony* 517-520.

³⁵⁵*Prometheus Bound* 356-358.

³⁵⁶Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 41. See also the discussion in T. Hopfner, *Plutarch über Isis und Osiris* (Prague, 1940), pp. 23, 185. R. Roeder, “Schow,” *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 571.

³⁵⁷R. Faulkner, “Some Notes on the God Shu,” *JEOL* 18 (1964), p. 266.

³⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 266. H. te Velde compares Shu to a “column of air”. See “Some Aspects of the God Shu,” *Jaarbericht ex Orient Lux* 27 (1981-1982), p. 27.

³⁵⁹D. Talbott, “On Testing the Polar Configuration,” *Aeon* 1:2 (1988), pp. 114-116; “Mother Goddess and Warrior Hero,” *Aeon* 1:5 (1988), pp. 42-65. See also E. Cochrane, “Heracles and the Planet Mars,” *Aeon* 1:4 (1988), pp. 101-105.

describe Shu as a “star,” a most peculiar situation if the conventional interpretation of the god as empty “air” is valid.³⁶⁰

According to the various Egyptian sources recounting Shu’s birth, the god is either spat out or otherwise expelled by the ancient sun-god amidst an immense outpouring of fiery material from whence derives the pillar-like support of the sun.³⁶¹ Indeed, as Budge pointed out long ago, the Egyptian account of the emission of Shu preserves the explicit relation between the pouring out of the god and the pillar-like support, the word *ashesh*—expressing the idea of “pouring out” but also “supporting”—being used of Shu’s birth.³⁶²

We will have reason to refer to Shu throughout the course of this book.

Certainly it is significant to find that Greek emigrants to Egypt early on identified their favorite hero with Shu, presumably because he too was intimately associated with the support of heaven.³⁶³ The pillars of Heracles, of course, were proverbial in Greek tradition. That they hark back to ancient conceptions of the World Pillar has long been noted. Cook, for example, offered the following observation: “The pillars of Heracles at one end of the Mediterranean...imply the belief that the sky rests upon solid and tangible supports.”³⁶⁴ Indeed, Philostratus reported that Heracles’ pillars supported heaven.³⁶⁵ That Heracles was held to have once assumed the burden of Atlas points in the same direction.³⁶⁶

INDRA’S ASSAULT OF SURYA

In addition to presenting a terrifying spectacle in the skies, the propensity for “swelling” came to form an essential component of the furor which characterized the war-god’s customary demeanor, epitomized by the epithet *susmintama*, “most

³⁶⁰3:334J in the Siut text. See the discussion in R. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1959), p. 44. Note also that Shu was elsewhere depicted as a red disc. See here E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* Vol. 1 (New York, 1969), p. 260.

³⁶¹E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* Vol. II (New York, 1969), pp. 90, 299.

³⁶²See also the discussion in D. Talbott, “Mother Goddess and Warrior Hero,” *Aeon* 1:5 (1988), pp. 48-49.

³⁶³On the identification of Heracles with Shu, see R. Roeder, “Schow,” *RML* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 566.

³⁶⁴A. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1965), pp. 422-423.

³⁶⁵Philostratus as reported by Apollodorus 5:5.

³⁶⁶Pherecydes in Scholia in Apollonius Rhodius 4.1936 FGH 1, 33.

impetuous one.”³⁶⁷ A passage cited earlier is typical: “Indra, Impetuous One, hath waxed immensely: he with his vastness hath filled earth and heaven.”³⁶⁸

Indra’s impetuous nature inspired him to commit numerous excesses. More than one Vedic hymn, for example, alludes to some sort of assault directed against the gods. As we have seen, this an archetypal theme associated with the warrior-hero.

Countless hymns in the *Rig Veda* allude to Indra’s intimate relations with Surya, the ancient sun-god. Among the Vedic war-god’s most celebrated feats are his role in delivering the Sun from a prison-like darkness; preparing a space within which it could rise; and propping it up with a pillar. The following hymn may be taken as typical: “Ye found the Sun, ye found the light of heaven;...Ye stayed the heaven with a supporting pillar.”³⁶⁹ It was on account of such traditions, as we have seen, that many investigators have sought to understand Indra’s mythus in terms of some sort of nature allegory.³⁷⁰

It is probable that Indra’s peculiar relationship to the Sun/Surya in certain Vedic hymns can be traced to the appearance or movement of Mars along the polar axis (here Surya would be identified with the planet Saturn). Consider, for example, the following passage: “What time thou settest near the Sun thy body, thy form, Immortal One, is seen expanding.”³⁷¹ How else but upon the astral nature of Indra is it possible to account for such imagery?

A recurring theme speaks of a violent confrontation of some sort between Indra and Surya. Several passages, for example, credit Indra with conquering the ancient sun-god. Other passages suggest that Indra’s assault of the ancient sun-god resulted in an eclipse-like disturbance. Consider the following passage: “For Surya in his own abode thou, Hero, formedst in fights even a Dasa’s nature.”³⁷² In his commentary upon this passage Griffith remarks:

³⁶⁷J. Gonda, *op. cit.*, p. 61. Numerous other Martian figures bore a similar epithet. The Akkadian Nergal, for example, received the epithet *mamlu*, “impetuous.” See E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 61.

³⁶⁸IV:16:5

³⁶⁹VI:72:1-2.

³⁷⁰A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (New York, 1974), pp. 54-66.

³⁷¹IV:16:14

³⁷²V:33:4

“The second half of the stanza refers to an eclipse of the sun. Indra is said to have formed for Surya in his own abode, that is, in the eastern heaven, the nature of a Dasa, i.e., made him a slave or dark.”³⁷³

Another hymn possibly alluding to some type of disturbance of the Sun is the following:

“Not even all the gathered gods conquered thee, Indra, in the war, When thou didst lengthen days by night. When for the sake of those oppressed, and Kutsa as he battled, Thou stolest away the Sun’s car-wheel.”³⁷⁴

This passage, if one accepts the plain meaning of the words, would appear to recount Indra’s participation in a great theomachy of some sort, during which the ancient sun-god was obscured or otherwise prevented from appearing at its scheduled time.³⁷⁵

In addition to these hymns, Griffith cites a handful of others which appear to associate Indra with some sort of disturbance of the Sun. Included is the following passage, discussed briefly in a previous chapter: “What time thou settest near the Sun thy body, thy form, Immortal One, is seen expanding.”³⁷⁶

These Vedic hymns must be viewed in the context of analogous traditions surrounding Heracles, Erra/Nergal, and Reseph. Recall also the astrological omen from ancient Babylon: “If the Sun goes down (by a Darkness/Eclipse) and Mars stands in its place, there will be an Usurpator.”³⁷⁷

Notice here that the placement of Mars within the immediate vicinity of the Sun offers a remarkable parallel to the Vedic tradition of Indra setting near the Sun: “What time thou settest near the Sun thy body, thy form, Immortal One, is seen expanding.”

³⁷³R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 252. It is with reference to such traditions, perhaps, that we are to understand the epithet *asita*, “dark, black” applied to the planet Saturn in Hindu tradition. See M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 105. The Babylonians likewise knew Saturn as the “Black Star,” *mul MI*. See the discussion in A. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen bei den indogermanischen Völkern* (Heidelberg, 1953), pp. 84-85.

³⁷⁴IV:30:3-4.

³⁷⁵See here the discussion in A. Macdonell & A. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol. 2 (Delhi, 1967), pp. 465-466. There the authors write: “This is possibly a reference to the obscuration of the sun by a thunderstorm.”

³⁷⁶IV:16:14

³⁷⁷P. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 82. On Nergal’s tendency to rise to the place of the setting sun, see E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 35.

These anomalous traditions of a disturbance of the Sun associated with the planet Mars demand an explanation. It is our contention that such reports preserve an actual historical reminiscence—albeit one that is typically couched in mythical language—of a profound disturbance of the ancient sun-god (Saturn) occasioned by the behavior of the planet Mars. Thus it is that Babylonian scribes expressly identified the “Sun” in these omen texts involving Mars with the planet Saturn!³⁷⁸

THE YOUTH

A striking feature of the Vedic career of Indra is the fact that the god accomplishes most of his greatest feats while yet an infant. Strangely enough, this bizarre and wholly unnatural theme would appear to be universal in nature. Prominent examples include Heracles’ strangling of the serpents while yet in the cradle³⁷⁹; Apollo’s slaying of the Python as an infant³⁸⁰; Huitzilopochtli’s defeat of Coyolxauhqui and the 400 warriors immediately upon his birth³⁸¹; Horus’ slaughter of the dragon of chaos while still a babe³⁸²; and Cuchulainn’s many exploits while yet a mere boy.

More than one of Indra’s epithets emphasize the god’s youthful nature. The epithet *Yuvan*, for example, signifies “youth.”³⁸³

It can be shown that most ancient war-gods bear a similar epithet. The Indian war-god of the Epic period, Skanda—expressly identified with the planet Mars³⁸⁴—was also known by the epithet of *Kumara*, which connotes a “youth.”³⁸⁵ The Armenian war-god Vahagn was called *patenekik*, “youth” or “child.”³⁸⁶ The Tamil war-god Murukan, similarly, was known as *muruku*, the “Young One.”³⁸⁷ In the

³⁷⁸M. Jastrow, “Sun and Saturn,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’Archaeologie Orientale* 7 (1909), p. 165.

³⁷⁹On Heracles and the serpents, see Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 1:33.

³⁸⁰On the combat of Apollo and Python, see the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, lines 300-304.

³⁸¹For Huitzilopochtli’s exploits, see H. B. Alexander, “Latin American Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (New York, 1964), p. 60.

³⁸²On the deeds of Horus, see *The Coffin Texts*, IV:219ff.

³⁸³M. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 820.

³⁸⁴S. Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities* (Lewiston, 1995), pp. 40-41. See also G. Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet’s Mill* (Boston, 1969), p. 157.

³⁸⁵M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 237.

³⁸⁶R. Hewsen, “The Birth of Vahagn: An Armenian Vision of Celestial Catastrophe?,” *Kronos* 3:1 (1977), p. 42.

³⁸⁷D. Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths* (Princeton, 1980) p. 280.

Edda the Norse Thor bears the epithet *sveinn*, signifying a “boy” or “youth.”³⁸⁸ The Egyptian Horus was known as the “youth.”³⁸⁹ The same motif can be found in the New World, where the Aztec war-god Tezcatlipoca was known as *Telpochtli*, “the Young Male.”³⁹⁰

In countless hymns Nergal is described as a “youth,” a stock epithet of the war-god being *Bul*, “youth.”³⁹¹ In his detailed analysis of Nergal’s cult, E. Weiher concluded that the concept of “youth” could not be divorced from the concept of “hero.”³⁹² Why this is so he could not divine. As the astral identification of Nergal suggests, the logical basis for these widespread traditions would appear to be the fact that the planet-god accomplished some of his greatest exploits shortly after his mythical “birth.”

CUCHULAINN

As we have seen, Indra’s status as a child-hero has remarkable parallels throughout the ancient world. A comparative study of such figures will go a long way towards illuminating the tumultuous infancy of Indra/Mars, alluded to again and again throughout the *Rig Veda*, albeit in an elusive manner. Inasmuch as Dumézil documented several parallels between the Vedic god and the Celtic hero Cuchulainn, a brief look at this fascinating figure is relevant at this point.

Variously described as “a little immature lad,” “a young bit of a little boy,” and a “beardless, hairless boy,” Cuchulainn’s prowess as a warrior manifested itself at a very early age. Indeed, the youthful hero first came to the attention of his elders when, upon invading the city of Emania from afar, he routed 150 members of the king’s boy-corps at various sports.³⁹³

³⁸⁸J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 4 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 1348. There Grimm called attention to the incongruity of this epithet: “Thor, imagined as a son (in the *Edda* he is either a youth or in the prime of manhood), does not accord well with the ‘old great-grandfather’...Are we to suppose two Donars, then?”

³⁸⁹T. Allen, *Horus in the Pyramid Texts* (Chicago, 1916), p. 19. The epithet *hrd nhn* means “the young child.”

³⁹⁰B. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun* (Norman, 1983), p. 87.

³⁹¹E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 16.

³⁹²*Ibid.*

³⁹³See E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), pp. 136-137.

It was the slaying of a monstrous hound which guarded the kingdom of Culann which marked Cuchulainn's greatest accomplishment and earned him his name, which signifies "the hound of Culann."³⁹⁴ This Herculean feat was accomplished at the tender young age of seven.

Cuchulainn was renowned for the furor which would periodically overtake him, compelling him to extraordinary feats of valor and strength. On one occasion, for example, the hero performed the proverbial "hero's salmon-leap," which propelled him across the bridge of the Scathach's netherworld kingdom.³⁹⁵ On another occasion, the heat engendered by the hero's furor is said to have melted the snow around him for a distance of thirty feet.³⁹⁶

In addition to the generation of intense heat, it was reported that while undergoing his furor Cuchulainn "became crimson all over," shook violently, and assumed a gigantic form. The epithet *Riastradh*, "The Distorted One," commemorates the radical distortion of features which distinguished the Celtic hero at such times. The *Tain Bo Cuailgne* describes the hero's furor as follows: "It was then that, as before, Cuchullin's distortion came on, and he was filled with swelling and great fulness, like breath in a bladder, until he became a terrible, fearful, many-colored, wonderful Tuaig (giant)."³⁹⁷

Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, in her analysis of the traditions surrounding Cuchulainn, notes that various Celtic words for "hero" likewise signify a "swelling." Summarizing her findings, Sjoestedt writes:

"We see that all the words for 'hero' express the notions of fury, ardour, tumescence, speed. The hero is the furious one, possessed of his own tumultuous and blazing energy."³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴Because of his slaying of the hound, Cuchulainn was bound to take the hound's place as guardian of Culann's lands, hence the name. The hero's original name was Setanta.

³⁹⁵E. Hull, "The Wooing of Emer," in *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 75. For evidence that Scathach's domain was actually the underworld see E. Hull, *op. cit.*, p. 291. This episode is closely paralleled by the leap of Finn across the threshold of the Queen of the netherworld in Gaelic tradition. See J. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 133.

³⁹⁶E. Hull, "Tain Bo Cuailgne," *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 160.

³⁹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁹⁸M. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 75.

Yet if the child-hero's furor aided him in the defense of the Irish borders, it also inspired him to commit numerous excesses, the frenzied slaughter of hundreds of men accompanying such outbursts on more than one occasion. A leading scholar of Celtic lore offered the following observation: "Now when Cuchulainn was distorted with anger and battlefury, he became gigantic in size, and made no distinction between friends or foes, but felled all before and behind equally."³⁹⁹

How are we to understand such peculiar traditions? Why would Celtic bards associate Cuchulainn—according to Sjoestedt the very "model of human conduct"—with indiscriminate slaughter? And what is the objective basis for the bizarre furor which distinguished the youthful hero?

Dumezil suggested that the myth of Cuchulainn's distortion commemorated certain rites of initiation in which the warrior's furor was intentionally aroused, whether through isolation, drugs, mutilation, deprivation, or some other mood-altering technique.⁴⁰⁰ No doubt there is some basis for drawing these comparisons. Unaddressed by Dumezil, however, is the question from whence derives the inspiration for the rituals themselves?

If we are to hold true to our thesis that the child-hero represents the planet Mars, we must seek the explanation of his strange furor—and of the rituals which sought to commemorate and humanize the phenomenon—in the ancient appearance of that planet. The emphasis on Cuchulainn's crimson color, explicitly coupled with the ability to swell and assume a gigantic form, must recall the sudden swelling of the ruddy-colored Indra. As we will document in subsequent chapters, this swelling appears to represent an archetypal motif associated with the warrior-hero.

Recall further that it is in the cults of such gods as the Akkadian Erra/Nergal, Greek Ares, and Latin Mars that one meets with this strange berserker-like furor, where death is dealt out with an indiscriminate zest. In the *Poem of Erra*, for example, the god himself is made to announce:

³⁹⁹J. Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (London, 1898), p. 439

⁴⁰⁰G. Dumezil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 135-137.

“Like a scorcher of the earth, I slew indiscriminately good and evil. One would not snatch a carcass from the jaws of a ravening lion, So too no one can reason where one is in a frenzy.”⁴⁰¹

Ares, the god inherent in the savagery of war and battle, was invoked by Homer as “the manslaughtering, bloodstained stormer of walls.”⁴⁰² Ares’ demeanor was typically described by such epithets as *lyssa*, signifying “martial rage, raving, frenzy,” and *mania*, signifying “madness, frenzy.”⁴⁰³ His propensity for fighting first for one side, then for the other, earned him the epithet *aloprosallos*, “fickle.”⁴⁰⁴

The Vedic war-god was likewise accorded a capricious nature, given to dealing out death and destruction at random. Oertel enumerates various examples of Indra’s bad faith, noting that the *Rig Veda* ascribed a fickle nature to the war-god: “It seems evident that such legends as these form the background for an occasional general allusion to Indra’s fickleness like RV 6, 47, 16; 17...‘wont to help on now the one now the other...he turneth away from his old friends and, changing, goeth with new ones.’”⁴⁰⁵

Nor is it without interest, given our identification of Indra with the red planet, that Mars was ascribed a fickle nature in Indian astronomical lore.⁴⁰⁶

The Latin god Mars was virtually synonymous with the rage and fury of war.⁴⁰⁷ A frequent epithet coupled with Mars is *saevio*, “to rage, be fierce, vent one’s rage.”⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰¹Translated in B. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, 1995), pp. 160-161.

⁴⁰²*Iliad* 5:31

⁴⁰³Sauer, “Ares,” *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), col. 658. See also H. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 909, 920. The word *lyssa* translates literally as “wolf’s madness,” and recalls the lupine nature so often ascribed to the Martian hero. Classic examples include Apollo *Lykeios*, Mars, and Lykurgos. See E. Cochrane, “Apollo and the Planet Mars,” *Aeon* I:1 (1988), pp. 58-59.

⁴⁰⁴*Iliad* 5:831, 889. See also H. Liddell & R. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 66. Significantly, this word is said to be derived from the root *allomai*, signifying “to spring, leap, or bound.” This propensity for leaping has now been observed in the cult of Ares, Cuchulainn, Vahagn, and Indra. Suffice it to say that it forms an archetypal characteristic of the Martian hero.

⁴⁰⁵H. Oertel, “Brahmana Literature,” *JAOS* 19 (1897), pp. 119-120.

⁴⁰⁶S. Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities* (Lewiston, 1995), p. 186. There, Markel cites Santhanam, *Brihat Parasara Hora*, 1:31-33 to the following effect: “Mars has blood-red eyes, is fickle-minded...given to anger...”

⁴⁰⁷Relevant here, perhaps, is the Greek word *margos*, signifying “raging mad, furious.” H. Liddell & R. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 921.

As Dumezil observed, however, it is the epithet *caecus*, “blind,” which best captures the essence of the god:

“The ambiguous character of Mars, when he breaks loose on the field of battle, accounts for the epithet *caecus* given him by the poets. At a certain stage of furor, he abandons himself to his nature, destroying friend as well as foe...By virtue of these very qualities of furor and harshness, Mars is the surest bulwark of Rome against every aggressor.”⁴⁰⁹

It is doubtless no coincidence that this description of Mars is equally applicable to the Celtic Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn, too, was equipped with the epithet blind, an ancient kenning stating simply “Cuchulainn the Blind.”⁴¹⁰

Fundamental to the blindness accorded the Latin war-god and Celtic hero—indeed to the concept of blind rage itself, which so often characterizes the rampage of the warrior-hero—is the fact that the planet Mars itself was deemed to be blind! De Santillana and von Dechend drew attention to this particular point in *Hamlet’s Mill*:

“There is a peculiar blind aspect to Mars, insisted on in both Harranian and Mexican myths. It is even echoed in Vergil: ‘*caeco Marte*’.”⁴¹¹

Comparative scholars have long drawn on Celtic lore in their analyses of ancient myth, reasoning that inasmuch as the Celts became isolated early on from other cultures and remained relatively free from Latin influence, there is a strong likelihood that their sacred traditions have preserved archaic elements. This suspicion is confirmed with regard to the mythus of the warrior-hero by numerous passages in Celtic manuscripts. Consider the following description of Cuchulainn’s furor from the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*:

“Then it was that he suffered his *riastradh*, whereby he became fearsome and many-shaped, a marvelous and hitherto unknown being. All over him, from his crown to the ground, his flesh and every limb and joint...quivered as does a tree, yea, a bulrush in mid-current. Within his skin he put forth an unnatural effort of his body: his feet, his shins, and his knees shifted themselves and were behind him...Then his face underwent an extraordinary transformation: one eye became engulfed in his head so far that ‘tis a

⁴⁰⁸F. Leverett, *Lexikon of the Latin Language* (Boston, 1850), p. 789.

⁴⁰⁹G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1970), p. 229.

⁴¹⁰E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 93.

⁴¹¹G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *Hamlet’s Mill* (Boston, 1977), p. 176.

question whether a wild heron could have got at it where it lay against his occiput, to drag it out upon the surface of his cheek; the other eye on the contrary protruded suddenly, and of itself so rested upon the cheek. His mouth was twisted awry until it met his ears. His lion's gnashings caused flashes of fire, each larger than the fleece of a three-year-old-wether, to steam from his throat into his mouth...Among the clouds over his head were visible showers and sparks of ruddy fire, which the seething of his savage wrath caused to mount up above him...His hero's paroxysm thrust itself out of his forehead longer and thicker than a warrior's whetstone. Taller, thicker, more rigid, longer than a ship's mast, was the upright jet of dusky blood which shot upwards from his scalp, and then was scattered to the four airts."⁴¹²

Is it possible to conjecture that the Tain's eerie account of Cuchulainn's furor preserves a figurative description of the great cataclysms which shaped the physiognomy of the planet Mars? In the grotesque contortions of the hero is it possible to see the convulsions of the planet Mars as it participated in a spectacular game of tug-of-war writ large in the skies?⁴¹³ Being the smallest of the planets participating in the configuration associated with Saturn, Mars must have suffered significant distortion of its atmosphere and tidal crust as it moved up and down the axis, periodically approaching the Earth and then Venus, waxing large and then waning.⁴¹⁴ The tremendous tidal forces that would likely have been generated by such a situation would almost certainly have precipitated the spontaneous eruption of volcanoes of colossal proportions. Evidence of volcanic activity, of course, is abundant on Mars, which has some of the most spectacular volcanoes yet discovered in this solar system.⁴¹⁵ Whether it was volcanic activity or some other visual

⁴¹²E. Hull, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-175.

⁴¹³According to Hall, in fact, it is difficult to account for the radical distortion of the northern face of Mars by any other means apart from its participation in the polar configuration associated with Saturn. See F. Hall, "Solar System Studies: Part Two," *Aeon* I:4 (1988), pp. 29-31.

⁴¹⁴The closest parallel in the current solar system, perhaps, is offered by the tidal distortion of Io as it is buffeted about between Jupiter and Europa/Ganymede. The result is tremendous surface tension resulting in the release of untold volumes of volcanic debris.

⁴¹⁵It stands to reason that if the thesis presented here is correct—that Mars recently orbited in close proximity to Saturn and experienced great cataclysms of thermal distress—remanent magnetism will most probably be found in the rocks and lava of Mars. The situation is analogous to Velikovsky's own expectations with regard to the possibility of remanent magnetism on the Moon. If anything one might expect more dramatic results upon Mars, given that planet's perturbations while under the influence of

phenomenon associated with the polar configuration which provided the inspiration for the imagery of Cuchulainn's furor, one thing is clear—the sacred traditions of the Celts do not have reference to a mortal hero:

“Among the clouds over his head were visible showers and sparks of ruddy fire, which the seething of his savage wrath caused to mount up above him...His hero's paroxysm thrust itself out of his forehead longer and thicker than a warrior's whetstone. Taller, thicker, more rigid, longer than a ship's mast, was the upright jet of dusky blood which shot upwards from his scalp, and then was scattered to the four airts.”

SAMSON AND HODER

There is no shortage of blind heroes, several of whom offer intriguing parallels to the Celtic Cuchulainn.⁴¹⁶ A familiar example of the strongman gone amok is the Biblical Samson, himself a blinded berserker identified with the planet Mars, a primary manifestation of whose furor was likewise a “hot anger” and terrible “shaking.”⁴¹⁷ Who has not been captivated as a youth by the image of Samson slaughtering a thousand Philistine warriors while wielding the jawbone of an ass?⁴¹⁸ Equally compelling is the image of Samson renting a lion with his bare hands⁴¹⁹, or casting off his prisoner's bonds as if they were waxen flax when in the throes of his furor.⁴²⁰

If the routing of the Philistines represents the pinnacle of the hero's career, his life is elsewhere marred by various excesses. Included here are the destruction of the

Saturn's relatively powerful magnetic field. For a discussion of this aspect of Velikovsky's work see R. Treash, “Magnetic Remanence in Lunar Rocks,” *Pensee* 2:2 (1972), pp. 21-23.

⁴¹⁶The blind hero, frequently a great sinner against the gods, is a universal mythological figure. In addition to Hoder and Samson, one might cite Lykurgos, Keresaspa, Oedipus, Paris, and Bellerophon as blind heroes whose crimes earn the wrath of the gods.

⁴¹⁷*Judges* 16:20ff. For the identification of Samson with the planet Mars, see G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 176. Cuchulainn's distortion of form, perhaps, finds a certain parallel in the “bowing” of Samson under the strain of the Philistine pillars.

⁴¹⁸*Judges* 15:15. Here it is interesting to note that some scholars have compared this episode to Indra's wielding the bone of a horse's head to defeat 99 vritras. *Rig Veda* VI:4:13. See A. Palmer, *The Samson-Saga* (New York, 1977), p. 123. See also G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

⁴¹⁹*Judges* 14:6.

⁴²⁰*Judges* 15:14. Here a close parallel is offered by the image of the infant Apollo, who is said to have burst his swaddling bands when he first tasted the divine ambrosia. See the *Homeric Hymn to the Delian Apollo*, 123-130. Cuchulainn, similarly, is said to have thrown off his various layers of clothes in order to

Philistine cornfields in the sadistic incident of the burning foxes, which resulted in the death of his wife and father-in-law⁴²¹; the carrying off of the gates of Gaza⁴²²; and the unprovoked murder of the 30 men from Ashkelon.⁴²³ Such incidents led Frazer to call attention to the glaring incongruities in the Biblical account of Samson:

“From first to last his story is that of an utterly selfish and unscrupulous adventurer, swayed by gusts of fitful passion and indifferent to everything but the gratification of his momentary whims. It is only redeemed from the staleness and vulgarity of commonplace rascality by the elements of supernatural strength, headlong valor, and a certain grim humor which together elevate it into a sort of burlesque epic after the manner of Ariosto. But these features, while they lend piquancy to the tale of his exploits, hardly lessen the sense of incongruity which we experience on coming across the grotesque figure of this swaggering, hectoring bully side by side with the solemn effigies of saints and heroes in the Pantheon of Israel’s history.”⁴²⁴

In addition to Samson one might point to the Norse hero Hoder, a blind god renowned for his tremendous strength. As Saxo describes the youthful hero, one is reminded of the precocious-prowess accorded Cuchulainn: “While a stripling, he excelled in strength of body all his foster-brethren and compeers.”⁴²⁵ Although Saxo depicts Hoder as an historical figure and in a relatively positive light, a dark pall hangs over the hero’s name in more ancient accounts. Snorri describes the blind warrior as follows:

“Höd is one of the gods. He is blind. He is immensely strong too, but the gods would rather there were no need to mention his name, since his handiwork will long be remembered amongst gods and men.”⁴²⁶

Like Heracles, Lykurgos and various other heroes, Hoder is said to have assaulted the gods themselves, on one occasion putting them to flight.⁴²⁷ Yet it is his role in the

prevent their bursting while under the throes of his furor. Heracles likewise bursts his bonds when held captive by the Pharaoh. See Apollodorus, II.5.11.

⁴²¹*Judges* 15:4-6.

⁴²²*Judges* 16:3.

⁴²³*Judges* 14:19.

⁴²⁴J. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York, 1988), p. 270.

⁴²⁵Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish History*, Vol. I (London, 1905), p. 177.

⁴²⁶Quoted from G. Dumezil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 59.

death of the beloved god Balder and the ensuing Ragnarok which earned the warrior-hero eternal infamy. Snorri describes the former god as follows:

“Another son of Odin’s is called Baldr, and there is [nothing but] good to be told of him. He is the best of them and everyone sings his praises. He is so fair of face and bright that a splendour radiates from him...He is the wisest of the gods...He lives in a place in heaven called Breidablik; nothing impure can be there.”⁴²⁸

Tricked by Loki, Höder killed Balder by firing a missile made of mistletoe within the confines of a sacred assembly-ground:

“Now Höd was standing on the outer edge of the circle of men because he was blind. Loki asked him: ‘Why aren’t you throwing darts at Baldr?’ He replied: ‘Because I can’t see where Baldr is, and, another thing, I have no weapon.’ Then Loki said: ‘You go and do as the others are doing and show Baldr honour like the other men. I will show you where he is standing: throw this twig at him.’ Höd took the mistletoe and aimed at Baldr as directed by Loki. The dart went straight through him and he fell dead to the ground. This was the greatest misfortune ever to befall gods and men.”⁴²⁹

If we are to judge by the popularity of his name, Höder was worshipped by various Teutonic peoples. As Grimm points out, the etymology of the god’s name marks him as a warrior *par excellence*, being related to various words signifying *belli impetus* and fervor:

“In these words, except where the meaning is merely intensified, the prevailing idea is plainly that of battle and strife, and the god or hero must have been thought of and honored as a warrior. Therefore [Hödr]...expressed phenomena of war; and he was imagined blind, because he dealt out at random good hap and ill.”⁴³⁰

Among the numerous puzzles surrounding the figure of Höder, none is greater than his appearance as a great judge. This apparent incongruity in the ancient traditions prompted the following observation from Rydberg:

“Höder, who both in name and character appears to be a most violent and thoughtless person, seems to be the one least qualified for this calling (peace-judge). Nevertheless

⁴²⁷This tradition is alluded to by various authors, including Saxo. See *The Danish History*, Vol. I (London, 1905), p. 184.

⁴²⁸Quoted from G. Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 59.

⁴²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 60.

he performed the duties of an arbiter by the side of Balder and probably under his influence. Saxo speaks of him as judge.”⁴³¹

As disconcerting as is the image of the Scandanavian strongman as peace-judge, it is no more so than Samson’s appearance as a judge in Israelite lore. Of Samson’s tenure on the bench, Frazer offered the following quip:

“Among the grave judges of Israel the burly hero Samson cuts a strange figure. That he judged Israel for twenty years we are indeed informed by the sacred writer, but of the judgments which he delivered in his judicial character not one has been recorded, and if the tenor of his pronouncements can be inferred from the nature of his acts, we may be allowed to doubt whether he particularly adorned the bench of justice.”⁴³²

Here, too, the bizarre association of the warrior-hero with judgeship—far from muddying the waters—conforms to an archetypal pattern. Gilgamesh also, as we have seen, was described as a judge. An ancient text invokes the hero as follows:

“Gilgamesh, perfect king, [judge of the Annunaki], wise prince...ruler of the earth...Thou art the judge, like a god who perceivest (everything). Thou standest in the underworld (and) givest final decision. Thy judgment is not changed, [thy] word is not forgotten.”⁴³³

Judgeship is also associated with many of the gods we have identified as personifications of the planet Mars. Nergal, as we have seen, was represented as the judge of the underworld.⁴³⁴ Dedications to the Latin war-god found in ancient Germanic regions invoke him as Mars *Thingsus*, god of the judicial assembly.⁴³⁵ The temple of Apollo *Lykeios* at Athens, likewise, originally served as a court of law.⁴³⁶ Consider also the intimate association of the Greek war-god with the Areopagus, “the hill of Ares” near the Athenian Acropolis upon which was held the highest judicial

⁴³⁰J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 1 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 223.

⁴³¹V. Rydberg, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 3 (London, 1907), p. 889.

⁴³²J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

⁴³³A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1970), p. 5.

⁴³⁴E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

⁴³⁵G. Turville-Petrie, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), p. 181. See also the discussion of G. Dumezil, *Mitra-Varuna* (New York, 1988), pp. 125-126.

⁴³⁶D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god* (McLean, 1991), p. 11.

court.⁴³⁷ Shu, similarly, reigned over the Ennead, the court of justice in Egyptian mythology.⁴³⁸

In Babylonian texts, the planet Mars is invoked as the “star of judgment of the fate of the dead.”⁴³⁹ Similar ideas prevailed in ancient China, where the red planet was known as “Bringer of Justice” and represented as a judge.⁴⁴⁰

THE SHAKER OF HEAVEN

In the spectacle of Samson pulling down the pillars of Dagon, “shaking” while in the throes of his furor, it is possible to recognize the widespread theme of the warrior-hero shaking the foundations of heaven. Nergal, for example, according to various ancient hymns, is said to have once shook the world out of joint.⁴⁴¹

Yet it is the Vedic war-god Indra who offers the most obvious example of this theme. Vedic hymns celebrate Indra as follows: “The ridges of the lofty heaven thou madest shake...”⁴⁴² Indra is elsewhere invoked as the “Shaker of things firm.”⁴⁴³ A similar passage is the following: “The Shaker conquers or slays in this way or that.”⁴⁴⁴

Again and again, Indra is described as shaking the foundations of heaven and earth:

“Indra with might shook earth and her foundation as the wind stirs the water with its fury.”⁴⁴⁵

“Through fear of thee, O Indra, all the regions of earth, tho naught may move them, shake and tremble.”⁴⁴⁶

⁴³⁷Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 681ff. “Here to all time for Aegeus’ Attic host Shall stand this council-court of judges sworn, Here the tribunal, set on Ares’ Hill.”

⁴³⁸Various passages in the *Coffin Texts* celebrate this aspect of the god: “I judge the entourage who are about the shrine.” See CT 1:391.

⁴³⁹Quoted from S. Langdon, “Semitic Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (New York, 1964), p. 147.

⁴⁴⁰G. Schlegel, *Uranographie Chinoise* (La Haye, 1875), p. 627.

⁴⁴¹J. Bollenrucher, *Gebete und Hymnen an Nergal* (Leipzig, 1904), p. 9.

⁴⁴²I:54:4

⁴⁴³V:18:5

⁴⁴⁴V:35:5

⁴⁴⁵IV:19:3

⁴⁴⁶V:34:5

“When he, yea, he, comes forth the firmset mountains and the whole heaven and earth, tremble for terror.”⁴⁴⁷

Yet another hymn recalls the commotion caused by Indra’s birth: “Thou art the Mighty One; when born, O Indra, with power thou terrifiedst earth and heaven; When, in their fear of thee, all firm-set mountains and monstrous creatures shook like dust before thee.”⁴⁴⁸

In the *Rig Veda* Indra’s stature as a “shaker” coalesces with his function as a storm-god. If mighty Indra shakes his fiery golden beard, it is a sign of “rain”:

“Shaking his beard with might he hath arisen, casting his weapons forth and dealing bounties...With him too is this rain of his that comes like herds: Indra throws drops of moisture on his yellow beard.”⁴⁴⁹

In a remarkable piece of scholarship, Schröder documented that this Vedic vignette has a close homologue in Norse traditions, where the red beard of Thor was a veritable icon. When the god was angry he blew into his beard and thunder could be heard.⁴⁵⁰ In the Norse poem *Thrymskvida*, Thor is represented as violently shaking his red beard and hair upon waking: “Wroth was he then, beard he took to bristling, hair to tossing.”⁴⁵¹

As Schröder noted, the Old Norse word for the shaking of Thor’s beard, *dyja*, is apparently the same as that employed above in the Vedic account of Indra’s beard—Sanskrit *dhu*, “to shake.”⁴⁵² The meanings inherent in these words and their Indo-European cognates include “to rage, rave, storm, vibrate,” and are in perfect agreement with the stormy character typically accorded the warrior-hero. The fact that Norse poets employed the same language in their oral tales as the poets of the *Rig Veda*—despite the fact that the respective peoples had diverged from a common

⁴⁴⁷I:61:14

⁴⁴⁸I:63:1

⁴⁴⁹X:23:1,4.

⁴⁵⁰See the discussion in J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. I (Gloucester, 1976), p. 177.

⁴⁵¹Strophe I. Quoted in J. Grimm, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁴⁵²F. Schröder, “Indra, Thor und Herakles,” *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 76 (1957), p. 41. M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 457. See also J. de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden, 1977), p. 89.

ancestor several thousand years previously—is ample proof of the power and longevity of the mythical imagery inspired by cataclysmic events.

THE DRAGON-COMBAT

Given its antiquity and apparent universal appeal, the dragon-combat assumes a prominent place in the study of ancient myth, religion, and ritual. Despite the ravages of time and the wholesale destruction of countless cultures and their sacred traditions, the dragon-combat lives on, still awaiting a Freud to come along and reconstruct the basic events behind the archetypal myth. That those events were celestial in nature there can be little doubt. And as the celestial prototype for the warrior-hero, the planet Mars figures prominently in numerous ancient myths of the dragon-combat. Indeed, it is the hero's identity with Mars which alone provides the rationale for many of the most bizarre elements of the myth.

The following chapter is not intended to represent the definitive analysis of the dragon-combat. Whole volumes will be required to elucidate the spectacular events at the heart of this intriguing mythical theme. Rather, here we merely attempt to analyze several intriguing motifs hitherto overlooked.

In order to properly interpret the myth of the dragon-combat, it is necessary at the outset of our investigation to place it in its proper mythological context. That the dragon-combat has a cosmogonical import has been recognized since the pioneering researches of Gunkel, who documented that it typically had reference to tumultuous events associated with the Creation.⁴⁵³ In the oldest form of the myth, the dragon typically appears as an obstructive force threatening the stability of the world and interfering with the process of Creation. The dragon's assault upon the heavenly kingdom results in an obscuration of the sun and/or imprisonment of the King of the Gods, among other things, and it is only through the intervention of the warrior-hero that the world is saved from the brink of destruction. Upon the dragon's defeat, the sun is restored to its proper place in heaven (or, alternatively, the King of the Gods is

⁴⁵³H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen, 1921). See also M. Wakeman, *God's Battle with the Monster* (Leiden, 1973), p. 3. This opinion is readily confirmed by numerous passages in the Old Testament which allude to Yahweh's primeval conquest of the dragon, the latter appearing under one of several different names: Yam, Rahab, Tehom, and Leviathan. See *Job* 9:8;

restored to power) and Creation is allowed to unfold. [Significantly, a prominent episode in several cosmologies finds the Creator building his throne upon the body of the vanquished dragon.]

With this brief synopsis of the dragon-combat behind us, we turn to the Vedic account of Indra and Vritra.

Our discussion of the traditions surrounding Indra revealed that the occasion of the hero's birth was associated with great tumult in heaven and earth. In the midst of this chaos, the infant found himself confronted by a colossal monster threatening the very existence of the world. Vritra's great crime involved his concealment of the sun and imprisonment of the life-giving waters. Indra's defeat of the dragon secured the release of the sun together with the waters. As we have seen, this primeval event is the subject of countless passages in the *Rig Veda*:

“Moreover, when thou first wast born, O Indra, thou struckest terror into all the people. Thou, Maghavan, rentest with thy bolt the Dragon who lay against the waterfloods of heaven.”⁴⁵⁴

Another typical passage celebrates Indra as follows:

“I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder. He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents. He slew the Dragon lying on the mountain; his heavenly bolt of thunder Tvaster fashioned. Like lowing kine in rapid flow descending the waters glided downward to the ocean.”⁴⁵⁵

As more than one scholar has noted, the defeat of the dragon and subsequent deliverance of the sun was Indra's greatest deed: “When thou hadst slain with might the dragon Vrtra, thou, Indra, didst raise the Sun in heaven for all to see.”⁴⁵⁶

The same basic story is alluded to again and again throughout the Vedic hymns, with several different names being applied to the eclipsing agent. On several occasions, the monster is called simply Ahi—“serpent.” Other passages credit Indra

Psalms 74; 89; 104; 65; and 93. See also J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 18-19.

⁴⁵⁴IV:17:7 All translations of Vedic hymns are from R. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda* (Delhi, 1973).

⁴⁵⁵I:32:1-3

⁴⁵⁶I:51:4

with overcoming the demon Svarbhanu: “What time thou smotest down Svarbhanu’s magic that spread itself beneath the sky, O Indra.”⁴⁵⁷ As to the nature of the demon’s crime the *Rig Veda* is explicit—it was the obscuration of the sun: “O Surya, when the Asura’s descendent, Svarbhanu, pierced thee through and through with darkness.”⁴⁵⁸

It is well-known, of course, that eclipses were occasions of great terror and omen throughout the ancient world. Indeed, the eclipse of the sun-god meant nothing less than the end of the world: “The end of the cosmos is seen in an eclipse of the sun, when the very existence of the god of order is threatened and the world is abandoned to the powers of darkness.”⁴⁵⁹

The deliverance of the sun from a prison-like pall of darkness, it can be shown, is one of the most pervasive themes associated with the warrior-hero. It is also one of the most ancient. Early Sumerian seals, for example, appear to show a hero dressed in lion skins engaged in what has been called “the liberation of the Sun-God from his Mountain Grave.”⁴⁶⁰ The Slavic god Perkunas, an acknowledged parallel to Indra, is likewise said to have freed the sun from captivity through the agency of his hammer.⁴⁶¹

Occasionally the theme of the sun’s deliverance from darkness may be divorced from the context of the dragon-combat. In Southern India, for example, Murukan replaces Indra as deliverer of the sun⁴⁶², although there the eclipsing agent is depicted as a great tree:

⁴⁵⁷V:40:6

⁴⁵⁸V:40:5

⁴⁵⁹A. Wensinck, “The Semitic New Year and the Origin of Eschatology,” *Acta Orientalia* (1923), p. 188.

⁴⁶⁰W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 80.

⁴⁶¹J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 4 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 1501.

⁴⁶²F. Clothey, “Skanda-Sasti: A Festival in Tamil India,” *History of Religions* 8 (1969), p. 236. No doubt it is significant that the Tamil god was identified with Skanda, who was himself identified with the planet Mars. Not surprisingly, the cult of Murukan is permeated with Martian motifs. There is an explicit relation between the Tamil god and the color red, for example, Murukan elsewhere being known by the epithet *Cey*, “the Red One.” Here one authority has stated: “Another fundamental symbolism is connected with Murukan’s redness: his complexion is red, he is clad in red and gold garments...The flowers of the katampu, his tree par excellence, are red. His bird, the awakener, is the red cock.” See K. Zvelebil, “A Guide to Murukan,” *Journal of Tamil Studies* 9 (1976), p. 11. D. Handelman, “Myths of Murugan...,” *History of Religions* 27:2 (1987), pp. 133-170, lists the following attributes of the god, all of which have Martian overtones: rambunctious infancy, during which he throws the cosmos into disorder; an episode in which the god is subjected to great heating and/or

“In the Tamil myth of Cur, the cosmic tree is not a Tree of Life but a Tree of Death, a dangerous embodiment of uncontrolled power which has upset the proper workings of the universe. Like Vrtra in the Vedic creation myth, it is a force opposed to order, filling and blocking the space necessary for creation, a source of darkness and chaos. This is the *axis mundi* in its negative aspect, represented by the tree associated with primordial chaos, and, as Indra must kill Vrtra and split open the cosmic mountain with which Vrtra is associated, so Murukan must cleave the mango tree.”⁴⁶³

[Given the acknowledged influence of Northern Sanskrit culture upon that of Southern Tamil culture, one might be tempted to argue that any resemblance between the respective traditions associated with Indra and Murukan was simply a product of diffusion. While this is possible, more than one scholar has suggested that the Tamil mythology associated with Murukan traces to pre-Aryan (i.e., Dravidian) sources and hence is largely independent of Sanskrit influence.⁴⁶⁴ However we answer this question, Murukan’s role in the deliverance of the sun remains significant given this god’s implicit identification with the planet Mars, the very planet we recognize behind the mythology of Indra.⁴⁶⁵]

A giant tree is also the eclipsing agent in a fascinating tale preserved in the *Kalevala*. There the hero who eventually frees the sun, strangely enough, is a homunculus by the name of Sampsa. The Finnish account reads as follows:

immolation; acts the part of a fool; prolific shapeshifter; suffers an episode of madness; behaves as if possessed or drunk; etc.

⁴⁶³D. Shulman, “Murukan, The Mango and Ekambaresvara-Siva: Fragments of a Tamil Creation Myth?” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 21 (1979), p. 32.

⁴⁶⁴See the discussion in K. Zvelebil, “Valli and Murugan—A Dravidian Myth,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 19 (1977), pp. 245ff.

⁴⁶⁵F. Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan* (New York, 1978), pp. 144-145. Although it could be argued, perhaps, that this identification traces to the Tamil god’s identification with Skanda, who was likewise identified with Mars, this would be an error. The truth is that the cult of Murukan is permeated with Martian motifs. There is an explicit relation between the Tamil god and the color red, for example, Murukan elsewhere being known by the epithet *Cey*, “the Red One.” Here one authority has stated: “Another fundamental symbolism is connected with Murukan’s redness: his complexion is red, he is clad in red and gold garments...The flowers of the katampu, his tree par excellence, are red. His bird, the awakener, is the red cock.” See K. Zvelebil, “A Guide to Murukan,” *Journal of Tamil Studies* 9 (1976), p. 11. D. Handelman, “Myths of Murugan...,” *History of Religions* 27:2 (1987), pp. 133-170, lists the following attributes of the god, all of which have Martian overtones: rambunctious infancy, during which he throws the cosmos into disorder; an episode in which the god is subjected to great heating and/or immolation; acts the part of a fool; prolific shapeshifter; suffers an episode of madness; behaves as if possessed or drunk; etc.

“A man rose out of the sea, a hero from the waves. He was not the hugest of the huge nor yet the smallest of the small: he was as big as a man’s thumb...Confronted with this strange little man, a wiseman [Vainamoinen] chides him with the following words: ‘You seem more like a man to me and the most contemptible of heroes. You’re no better than a dead man and a face on you like a corpse!’”⁴⁶⁶

At this point the little man blurts back:

“‘I am a man as you see—small, but a mighty water-hero. I have come to fell the oak-tree and splinter it to fragments!’ Vainamoinen, old and wily, scoffed: ‘Why, you haven’t the strength, you’ll never be able to fell the magic oak-tree and splinter it to fragments!’

Scarcely had he said these words when, before his eyes, the little man was transformed into a giant. He stamped with his feet on the earth and his head reached up to the clouds; his beard flowed to his knees and his hair to his heels. His eyes were fathoms wide and his legs fathoms long...He struck the tree with his axe...Sparks flew from the axe and flame from the oak as he tried to bend the magic tree to his will. At the third stroke the oak-tree was shattered...Now that the oak-tree was felled and the proud trunk leveled, the sun shone again...”

The sudden growth of Sampsa offers a close parallel to the rapid swelling which forms such a prominent motif in the traditions surrounding Indra and Cuchulainn.⁴⁶⁷ It is a motif that we will encounter again and again in the traditions surrounding the warrior-hero.

INTO THE BELLY OF THE DRAGON

⁴⁶⁶The following account is taken from C. Jung & K. Kerényi, “The Primordial Child in Primordial Times,” in *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (Princeton, 1973), pp. 41-42.

⁴⁶⁷Here it is relevant to note the apparent relation between the name Sampsa and Sampo, a magical object in the *Kalevala*, identified by several scholars with the World Pillar. See G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *Hamlet’s Mill* (Boston, 1969), p. 232. Of the latter word the editor of the *Kalevala* observes: “The name would seem to be somehow connected with *sammas* (gen. *sampaan*) ‘pillar, post’ in Vote and *sammas* (gen. *samba*) ‘prop, mainstay, support’ in Estonian. Estonian *sammas* posits a base-word *sampa*, of which Sampo would be an o-diminutive and thus mean or suggest ‘prop of life.’” See F. Magoun, *The Kalevala* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 400-401. The relationship between Sampsa and Sampo thus offers a close parallel to that which pertains between Skanda/Mars and the *skambha*, the latter being a name for the World Pillar in the *Rig Veda*. See the discussion in E. Cochrane, “Indra” *Aeon* 2:4 (1991), p. 74.

An intriguing motif makes the warrior-hero descend into the belly of the dragon in order to conquer it. Such a tale was related of Heracles, for example. According to various Greek chroniclers, it was while waging combat with the dragon which ravaged Troy that the Greek strongman leapt fully armed into the monster's mouth. Three days later Heracles emerged from the beast's belly, although the experience had rendered him bald.⁴⁶⁸

As bizarre as this myth reads, precise parallels to Heracles' plight can be found throughout the ancient world.⁴⁶⁹ Consider the following example offered by Leo Frobenius:

"A hero is devoured by a water-monster...Meanwhile, the hero lights a fire in the belly of the monster, and feeling hungry, cuts himself a piece of the heart. Soon afterwards, he notices that the fish has glided on to dry land; he immediately begins to cut open the animal from within; then he slips out. It was so hot in the fish's belly that all his hair has fallen out."⁴⁷⁰

The theme of the swallowed hero/god was especially popular among the Polynesian Islanders, with various local creatures assuming the role of the man-eating dragon. Upon Tuamotus, for example, it was the war-god Tangaroa who was swallowed by a whale, only to find upon cutting his way out that the experience had cost him every hair on his head.⁴⁷¹ Much the same story was told by the natives of Hawaii. There it is the hero Kukuipahu who was swallowed by a shark and somehow managed to survive inside the monster's belly for a period of days. Eventually, however, the hero escaped and made it to shore although his hair had since fallen out.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁸Scholiast to the *Iliad*, 20:146; scholiast to Lykophron, 34. For summaries of this myth, see R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol. II (New York, 1970), p. 169; and K. Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (New York, 1959), pp. 160-161.

⁴⁶⁹For an extensive discussion of this motif see L. Frobenius, *Das Zeitalter des Sonnengottes* (Berlin, 1904), pp. 59-220.

⁴⁷⁰Translation in C. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (Princeton, 1976), p. 210.

⁴⁷¹M. Beckwith, *Hawaiian Mythology* (Honolulu, 1970), p. 503. Of Tangaroa's possible identification with the planet Mars speaks a number of things, not the least of which is the fact that he was described as being bright red in color.

⁴⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 132.

A similar account comes from the Torres Straits. There it is the hero Mutuk who is swallowed by a great shark and—as was the case with Kukuipahu—rendered bald as a result of his sojourn within the beast’s belly.⁴⁷³ The natives along the North coast of America tell the same basic story. There the offending monster is a whale, and it is said that it was so hot in the whale’s stomach that the regurgitated hero’s hair fell out.⁴⁷⁴

In addition to the specific pattern apparent in all these various traditions—the regurgitation of the hero being accompanied by the affliction of baldness—there is also a more general pattern: namely, the hero is discomfited in some manner as a result of his sojourn within the monster. Analysis of the various myths of the dragon-combat suggests that what is implied in these traditions is a temporary “death” suffered by the hero as a result of his encounter with the dragon.

A prominent episode in Jason’s expedition to recover the Golden Fleece, for example, found the hero consigned to enter the jaws of a giant dragon which guarded the Fleece. Kerenyi summarized this episode as follows:

“It is from a vase-painter again that we learn how Jason returned from the jaws of the gigantic snake. He was in the same state as Heracles when he emerged from the Nemean lion’s den, as indeed it was natural for a mortal to be whenever the underworld gave one back to the world of the living. He hung fainting from the dragon’s mouth...Lifeless from exhaustion he came back from the belly of the monster and needed a rescuer who should awaken him from the drunken swoon of death. In this painting it is Athene who does this; elsewhere it is Medeia, who is seen on vase-paintings following the hero with her magic herbs. The hardest point for the later narrators was the death apparently, and in a sense really, undergone by Jason, through which he won the Golden Fleece.”⁴⁷⁵

Jason’s “death” in the wake of the dragon-combat has a multitude of mythic parallels, prominent examples including the temporary death of Heracles as a result of his combat with Typhon and Apollo’s “death” at the hands of Python.⁴⁷⁶ The discomfiture of Jason as a result of the dragon-combat, moreover, conforms to a

⁴⁷³L. Frobenius, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁴⁷⁴*Ibid.* p. 82.

⁴⁷⁵K. Kerenyi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (New York, 1959), pp. 264-265.

⁴⁷⁶Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistoi* 10:47:392d; Zenobius, *Paroemiographi* 5:56. See also the discussion in J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 86-88.

widespread pattern in which the warrior-hero experiences a temporary “death,” coma-like sleep, or period of stupor in the aftermath of some formidable labor. One thinks here of the mysterious sleep which overtakes Heracles as a result of his wrestling with the Nemean Lion⁴⁷⁷; of Gilgamesh’s coma, induced by Huwawa upon the felling of the sacred Cedar trees⁴⁷⁸; of Samson’s lethargy in the aftermath of his slaughter of the Philistines⁴⁷⁹; of Cuchulainn’s death-like sleep in the grave of Lerga⁴⁸⁰; and of the enfeeblement and near death of Ares upon his release from imprisonment in the jar of the Aloeds.⁴⁸¹

It is among the sacred traditions of the Maori, perhaps, that one finds the most striking parallel to Jason’s “death.” There it is the dauntless hero Maui who—goaded into accepting the challenge of entering into the belly of a dragon-like monster known as Hine-nui-te-po—discovers that entering the monster is easier than exiting it. Just as he was about to emerge from the dragon’s maw, the great beast clamped shut its jaws, crushing Maui in the process. And so it was that death first entered the world:

“Thus died this Maui we have spoken of...According to the traditions of the Maori, this was the cause of the introduction of death into the world (Hine-nui-te-po being the goddess of death): if Maui had passed safely through her, then no more human beings would have been destroyed.”⁴⁸²

The traumatic experiences of Jason and Maui, alas, find an intriguing parallel within the career of Indra. Thus, in the *Mahabharata* it is related that Indra was swallowed by the dragon Vritra, from whom he barely escaped.⁴⁸³ Indra finally succeeds in exiting the maw of the monster by way of a ruse—the war-god shrinks to

⁴⁷⁷See K. Kerényi, *op. cit.*, pp. 142. Heracles sleeps a “death-like” sleep in the *Trachiniae* as well (969-970).

⁴⁷⁸See the discussion in S. Kramer, “Gilgamesh: Some New Sumerian Data,” in ed. P. Garelli, *Gilgamesh et sa légende* (Paris, 1960), p. 65.

⁴⁷⁹*Judges* 15:19

⁴⁸⁰On the sleep of Cuchulainn see E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 171.

⁴⁸¹*Iliad* 5:385-391.

⁴⁸²G. Grey, *Polynesian Mythology and Ancient Traditional History of the New Zealanders* (Sydney, 1929), pp. 40-41. See also the valuable discussion of this myth in M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York, 1975), pp. 220-221.

⁴⁸³*Mbh.*, Udy 9-16. See also the discussion in J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley, 1980), p. 198.

a miniature form and slips through the gaping mouth when the monster yawns.⁴⁸⁴ Elsewhere it is reported that upon defeating the dragon, Indra “ran away” and assumed a diminutive form within a lotus stalk, unconscious as if dead and cowering like a serpent.⁴⁸⁵

Although the account in the *Mahabharata* is late and may well be sanitized in light of Indra’s divinity, it would appear likely that the Vedic god of war—like Jason and Maui—came close to death as a result of his encounter with the dragon. On this score we find ourselves in complete agreement with Fontenrose:

“The *Mahabharata* is later than the *Vedas*, which say nothing about the swallowing of Indra or his lying as in death at the world’s end. Yet we should not attribute the epic’s elaborations entirely to the poet’s invention—these episodes belong to the myth of the dragon combat.”⁴⁸⁶

THE RED DWARF

It is probable that the aforementioned episode in which Indra assumes a miniature form likewise belongs to the most archaic elements of the dragon combat. Here it is significant to note how often the dragon-combat turns in accordance with the hero’s ability to make himself tiny or, alternately, gigantic.⁴⁸⁷ A widespread motif has the shape-shifting hero assume a miniature form in order to enter the dragon’s belly, from whence he subsequently carves his way out. The Maya hero Ez, for example, is said to have assumed a dwarfish form in order to gain entrance into the belly of a dragon.

⁴⁸⁴D. Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton, 1985), p. 222.

⁴⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 222-225. See also the discussion in G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 124.

⁴⁸⁶J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley, 1959), p. 199.

⁴⁸⁷Murukan, for example, assumes a gigantic form embracing the whole of creation during his combat with the demon Cur. See D. Shulman, “Murukan, Mango and Ekambaresvara-siva,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 21 (1979), p. 31. The Maori dragon-slayer Maui, similarly, was a notorious shape-shifter. If on one occasion the hero is capable of shrinking himself to the size of an insect, on another he can assume a gargantuan form dominating all of heaven. The following account is from a myth associated with the raising of the sky—a vestige, apparently, of ancient Maori cosmology—whereupon Maui is said to have engaged in a great battle with Ru: “Ru seized Maui, who was of small stature, and hurled him to a great height. In falling, however, Maui assumed the form of a bird, and lightly reached the ground, quite unharmed. In a moment he resumed his natural form, but extended to gigantic proportions; and he hurled Ru, sky and all, to a tremendous height—so high that the sky could never get back again; and the head and shoulders of Ru got entangled among the stars, where he was held

Shortly thereafter, “When the serpent swallowed him, he cut his way out with the obsidian and killed the serpent. He emerged bigger and stronger than before.”⁴⁸⁸

As a dragon-slaking dwarf, Ez has numerous parallels in the sacred traditions of Pre-Columbian Indians from North and South America. Consider, for example, a fascinating figure from South America known as Mura, the trusty servant of the great god Pura, the primal sun.⁴⁸⁹ Described as a red dwarf renowned for his club and giant knife, Mura is said to reside upon the World Mountain at the center of heaven, together with—but in a position subordinate to—the sun-like Pura. According to Arikana tradition, Pura and Mura once found themselves in the belly of a great serpent and it was only with much resourcefulness that they eventually hacked their way out thanks to the aforementioned knife.⁴⁹⁰

It is tempting to compare the club-wielding red dwarf with Heracles, the latter also renowned for his club and homunculus-like (daktyl) form.⁴⁹¹ Mura’s role as a subordinate satellite of the ancient sun-god, moreover, conforms exactly with the station accorded the red planet in the Old World.

As is the case with any truly archetypal mythical theme, the shape-shifting red dwarf can be found throughout the ancient world.⁴⁹² A prominent figure in Indian lore is Hanuman, described as having a “tiny, little, puny little monkey body.”⁴⁹³ Yet this same figure can elsewhere swell to the point whereupon his body occupies all of

prisoner, struggling, until he perished.” See J. Andersen, *Myths and Legends of the Polynesians* (Rutland, 1969), p. 223.

⁴⁸⁸M. Pickands, “The Hero Myth in Maya Folklore,” in G. Gossen ed., *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community* (Albany, 1986), p. 121.

⁴⁸⁹Pura was the leading god of the Arikana Indians, a Carib tribe of the Guianas. See A. Kruse, “Pura, das Hochste Wesen der Arikana,” *Anthropos* 50 (1955), p. 406.

⁴⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 412.

⁴⁹¹On Heracles as a daktyl see E. Cochrane, “The Death of Heracles,” *Aeon* 2:5 (1991), pp. 66-68.

⁴⁹²Compare the red dwarf of Quiche lore known as Sparkstriker. See D. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh* (New York, 1985), p. 368. Other Quiche names for the red dwarf include C’oxol, Tzimit, and Tzitzimit. See B. Tedlock, “On a Mountain in the Dark: Encounters with the Quiche Culture Hero,” in G. Gossen ed., *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community* (Albany, 1986), pp. 125-138. A red dwarf known as Vai-Mahsë is also a prominent figure in the sacred lore of the Indians of Columbian Amazon. See G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos* (Chicago, 1971), p. 80ff. I am indebted to Dave Talbott for this last reference.

⁴⁹³*Sundarakanda* 37:31 as quoted in J. Masson, “Hanuman as an Imaginary Companion,” *Journal of the Am. Oriental Society* 101:3 (1981), p. 355.

heaven. Witness the following account from the *Ramayana*, where Hanuman finds himself confronted by a giant monster:

“Later, a huge form stood in his way and said: ‘Enter my mouth. I have been without food for a long time and am eagerly waiting for you,’ and the monster opened wide like a cave...Hanuman thought quickly and decided what to do. Step by step he made his body grow bigger and bigger. The Raakshasa form (the monstrous form assumed by Surasa, a Naaga goddess) opened its mouth correspondingly wider and wider. When the mouth was thus enormously wide, all of a sudden Hanuman contracted his body into a speck and, darting through the demon’s mouth and body, came out again and resumed his former normal shape.”⁴⁹⁴

Hanuman resorts to the same ploy on another occasion. This time, however, it is the very fact of the hero’s assuming a gargantuan form that causes the belly of the dragon to burst, thereby bringing about its death. Jung summarized the episode as follows: “Once more he had recourse to his earlier stratagem, made himself small, and slipped into her body; but scarcely was he inside than he swelled up to gigantic size, burst her, and killed her, and so made his escape.”⁴⁹⁵

The fact that Hanuman (or his face) is elsewhere said to be ruby-red in color offers a certain parallel to the aforementioned dwarfs from the New World.⁴⁹⁶ Nor can the shape-shifting contortions ascribed to Hanuman fail to evoke comparison with the grotesque contortions undergone by the ruddy-colored heroes Cuchulainn and Indra whilst in the throes of their respective “furors.” In Indra’s case, it will be remembered, he swelled to such an extent that he dominated the region between heaven and earth, actually threatening to block out the light of the sun.

The Celtic hero Cuchulainn, explicitly described as a dwarf⁴⁹⁷, was said to swell up like a ball when angry, thereby assuming the form of a giant:

“Then it was that he suffered his *riastradh*, whereby he became fearsome and many-shaped, a marvelous and hitherto unknown being. All over him, from his crown to the ground, his flesh and every limb and joint...quivered as does a tree, yea, a bulrush in

⁴⁹⁴C. Rajagopalachari, *Ramayana* (Bombay, 1968), p. 209.

⁴⁹⁵C. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (Princeton, 1976), p. 211.

⁴⁹⁶C. Rajagopalachari, *op. cit.*, p. 208. See also J. Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion* (New York, 1961), p. 109.

⁴⁹⁷E. Mayrhofer-Passler, “Cuchulinn und der Genius Cucullatus,” *op. cit.*, pp. 26-31.

mid-current. Within his skin he put forth an unnatural effort of his body: his feet, his shins, and his knees shifted themselves and were behind him...Then his face underwent an extraordinary transformation: one eye became engulfed in his head so far that 'tis a question whether a wild heron could have got at it where it lay against his occiput, to drag it out upon the surface of his cheek; the other eye on the contrary protruded suddenly, and of itself so rested upon the cheek. His mouth was twisted awry until it met his ears. His lion's gnashings caused flashes of fire, each larger than the fleece of a three-year-old-wether, to steam from his throat into his mouth...Among the clouds over his head were visible showers and sparks of ruddy fire, which the seething of his savage wrath caused to mount up above him...His hero's paroxysm thrust itself out of his forehead longer and thicker than a warrior's whetstone. Taller, thicker, more rigid, longer than a ship's mast, was the upright jet of dusky blood which shot upwards from his scalp, and then was scattered to the four airts."⁴⁹⁸

Cuchulainn's *riastradh* bears comparison with the metamorphosis undergone by Hanuman, described as follows in the *Ramayana*:

"At once Hanuman's form began to swell like the sea at high tide...The hair of Hanuman's body stood on end and he roared and lashed his tail on the ground. He contracted his hind parts, held his breath, pressed down his feet, folded his ears and stiffened his muscles...He seemed to swallow the sky as he flew forward. His eyes glistened like mountain forests on fire. His red nose shone like the evening sun. His huge frame spanned the sky like an enormous comet."⁴⁹⁹

ON FORCIBLE EXITS AND BIRTHS

With the bizarre tale of Hanuman before us, it is interesting to consider the possibility that the warrior-hero's forcible exiting of the dragon's belly represents a mythical analogue of the widespread motif whereby the hero's forcible birth results in the death of his mother.⁵⁰⁰ This hypothesis is supported by several considerations. In various traditions, like that involving Hanuman, the dragon is identified as being a great goddess. Elsewhere, as was the case with Maui, the monster is explicitly

⁴⁹⁸E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), pp. 174-175.

⁴⁹⁹C. Rajagopalachari, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

⁵⁰⁰See, for example, the account given by W. Miller, "North America," in *Pre-Columbian American Religions*, eds. W. Krickeberg *et al* (New York, 1969), p. 182.

identified with the Goddess of Death, who also doubles as the hero's mother.⁵⁰¹ In a few instances both motifs—the death of a dragon-like monster and the death of the hero's mother—are conflated in a single myth. Such is the case in a curious episode from the mythical career of Finn, a dwarfish hero of Gaelic lore.

Irish bards tell of the primeval occasion during which Finn became forced to carry his foster mother in order to escape from their enemies. Eventually the weight became too much for the hero to bear, whereupon he threw his foster-mother down, at which point she turned into a hag-like dragon and began ravaging the land. Later, upon confronting the monster and being swallowed, the hero hacked his way out of the beast's belly.⁵⁰² Significantly, upon emerging Finn was described as “without a single hair or shred of clothing on his body.”⁵⁰³

Other Gaelic traditions relate that Finn's birth resulted in the death of his mother. Like the bees enclosed by Baltic amber, these tales preserve “fossilized” motifs, as it were, and offer abundant proof that archaic elements have been preserved even amongst these oral tales of the Irish, some of which were first committed to writing in the last 200 years.⁵⁰⁴

Finn's role in the death of his mother is of interest to us here because Indra too, apparently, caused his mother's death as a result of the unusual manner of his birth. According to the Vedic account, Indra refused to take the customary canal of delivery, announcing his intention to issue “forth from the side obliquely.”⁵⁰⁵ The hymn recounting the god's birth—believed to be among the most ancient in the *Rig Veda*—relates that Indra was concealed by his mother prior to his battle with Vritra.⁵⁰⁶ That this concealment involved his being swallowed is suggested by a subsequent verse in

⁵⁰¹W. Westervelt, *Maui: Demi-god of Polynesia* (Honolulu, 1910), p. 5. The same motif is present in the *Kalevala*, where the swallowing monster is identified with the Goddess of Death. See here the discussion of D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god* (McLean, Virginia, 1991), pp. 97ff.

⁵⁰²J. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 302.

⁵⁰³*Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p. 302. A similar tale is also preserved of Finn's son who, upon being swallowed by a giant dragon, emerges from it's belly devoid of hair.

⁵⁰⁵IV:18:1-2

⁵⁰⁶IV:18:5 Here W. O'Flaherty, “The Case of the Stallion's Wife,” *J. Am. Oriental Society* 105:3 (1985), p. 493, writes: “Indra himself was kept in his mother's womb for many years, and finally broke out against her will.”

the same hymn, wherein an otherwise unknown female by the name of Kusava is said to have swallowed the god.⁵⁰⁷

Whether or not the hero's forcible bursting from the belly of the dragon is to be regarded as a mythic doublet of the hero's unusual manner of birth, it is clear nonetheless that the harrowing experiences of Hanuman, Finn, and Ez can contribute to our understanding of Indra's plight when swallowed by Vritra, not to mention his subsequent flight and shape-shifting.

THE HERO AS IMPLANTED EMBRYO

In light of the resemblance between the myth of the hero's birth and his forcible exit from the dragon's belly, it is interesting to note the widespread motif whereby a hero assumes (or is given) a miniature form in order to be reborn. In an intriguing myth from South America, for example, it is related that the hero Karuetauyben was once rendered minuscule in form and re-inserted into the womb of his mother.⁵⁰⁸ Karuetauyben grew so rapidly upon being "born" that he earned the name *Bekit-tare-be*, "the male child who grows fast." Here it is impossible not to recognize the analogy between this myth and the hero's entrance into the belly of the dragon as a homunculus: In both cases the hero enters the belly/womb as a miniature being and swells or grows with great rapidity upon emerging. And as the hero swallowed by a dragon is frequently described as a red dwarf, so too was the metamorphosed embryo Karuetauyben described as ruddy-colored, his name signifying "the red male macaw with the bloodshot eyes."⁵⁰⁹

A similar story surrounds the birth of the Celtic hero Cuchulainn. Once upon a time, it is related, the Celtic god Lug—renowned for his brilliant red form and explicitly identified with the Latin god Mars⁵¹⁰—assumed a miniature form and was reborn from the goblet of Dechtair (a Celtic goddess) as Cuchulainn.⁵¹¹ Significantly,

⁵⁰⁷IV:18:8 For a similar conclusion see N. Brown, *J. of Am. Oriental Society* 62 (1942), p. 95.

⁵⁰⁸This account is taken from C. Levi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* (Chicago, 1973), pp. 205-206. See also A. Kruse, "Karusakaybe, der Vater der Munduruku," *Anthropos* 47 (1953), pp. 992-1018.

⁵⁰⁹*Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵¹⁰H. R. Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Syracuse, 1988), p. 89.

⁵¹¹A. Nutt, *Cuchulainn: The Irish Achilles* (London, 1900), p. 5. In the universal lexikon of symbols, of course, the goddess originally was synonymous with the vase, pot, or goblet. See the discussion in M. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York, 1958), p. 57.

at least one modern scholar has identified Lug with the planet Mars, thereby supporting our identification of Cuchulainn.⁵¹²

ON MYTH AND RITUAL

A widespread motif in puberty rites, found among aboriginal peoples of both the Old and New Worlds, finds the initiate consigned to enter the belly of an effigy representing a great monster. Of such rites, Eliade offers the following observation:

“Several times during our exposition we have met with the initiatory ordeal that consists of being swallowed by a monster. There are innumerable variants of this rite, which can be compared with Jonah’s adventure with the whale...This initiatory motif has given birth not only to a great number of rites but to myths and legends not always easy of interpretation.”⁵¹³

It is Eliade’s opinion that the initiatory rites featuring the novices’ swallowing by a dragon gave rise to the various myths and legends, some of which we have encountered above. Other scholars have expressed similar views. It is patently obvious, however, that Eliade’s thesis leaves unexplained the origin of the rites themselves, not to mention the peculiar details of the dragon-combat. From whence derives the inspiration for the hero’s entry into the belly of the dragon, or the bizarre motif of the hero’s becoming alternately miniature and gigantic?

According to our thesis, in which the ingested hero—Heracles, Indra, Finn, Mura, Maui, Hanuman, etc.—represents a personification of the planet Mars, one would expect to find the inspiration for both the myths *and* the associated initiation rites in spectacular events associated with the red planet itself. Thus, the archaic rites of initiation featured an entrance into the body of a great monster for the simple reason that the planet Mars—the celestial prototype of the warrior-hero—was witnessed performing a similar feat at the dawn of time.

How, then, are we to understand the hero’s entry into the belly of the dragon? A decisive clue is provided by the complimentary myth of the implanted embryo. If one

⁵¹²R. Hicks, “Astronomical Traditions of Ancient Ireland and Britain,” *Archaeoastronomy* 8:1-4 (1985), p. 77. It is well-known, moreover, that more than one of the aboriginal Celtic war-gods subsequently identified with the Latin Mars was explicitly described as being red in color. See A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), pp. 169-171; M. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 27-28.

approaches such traditions from the vantage-point offered by the Saturn-thesis, it can be seen that as Mars ascended the polar column in the direction of Venus it would gradually shrink in size and eventually reach a point at which it would appear to enter the larger Venusian orb (see diagram X). To terrestrial observers, it appeared as if the warrior-hero had re-entered the womb of the mother-goddess (Venus). Hence the origin of the myth of the warrior-hero as implanted embryo.

[If this argument is well-founded, it follows that the planet Venus should have been envisaged as a giant dragon by various ancient peoples.] If the myth of the implanted embryo parallels the myth of the hero's descent into the dragon's belly, it follows that the womb of the goddess (Venus) is also the belly of the dragon. That the planet-goddess Venus was frequently represented as a dragon is well-documented.⁵¹⁴ So, too, is the fact that every ancient goddess of note is described as a great dragon or as having serpentine attributes. In light of the overlapping identities of the dragon and mother goddess—explicit in the case of Finn, Maui, and Hanuman, but deducible in numerous other variations of the same theme—it becomes apparent that the belly of the dragon is synonymous with the womb of the mother goddess.

If this is so, it is only logical to attempt to understand the hero's forcible birth from the goddess as a variation upon his forcible exit from the belly of the dragon. The same conclusion is supported by the various traditions whereby the hero swells in size upon birth from the mother goddess (as in the case of Indra, Karuetauryben and others), but also upon exiting the dragon's belly (as in the case of Hanuman, Ez and others). As we have documented, this rapid "swelling" is specifically associated with the planet Mars and with "Martian" heroes throughout the ancient world.

[One motif has yet to be accounted for—the hero's being rendered bald as a result of his exiting the dragon's belly. While the full story of this episode will require whole volumes and thus must await another occasion, a couple of observations are in order here. As Talbott and I have shown, Venus was widely regarded as a "hairy-star" or, alternatively, as a sacred lock of hair.⁵¹⁵ For various reasons, outlined elsewhere,

⁵¹³M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York, 1975), p. 219.

⁵¹⁴Such is the case in both the Old World and New. See the discussion in E. Cochrane & D. Talbott, "When Venus was a Comet," *Kronos* 12:1 (1987), pp. 5-13.

⁵¹⁵See the discussion of D. Talbott, "The Great Comet Venus," *Aeon* 3:5 (1994), pp. 13-23.

we would refer such traditions to a specific phase in the recent history of Venus, one in which the planet's atmosphere became greatly distended, presenting the appearance of a wavy "lock of hair." [See Diagram] During the period of Mars' appearance within the visual outlines of Venus (i.e., in the belly of the dragon), it stands to reason that the Martian hero would naturally partake of this "hairy" symbolism. And thus it is that many Martian heroes are distinguished by their sacred lock of hair while "youths"—literally the time in which Mars appeared in close proximity to Venus; at its breast, as it were (the Egyptian Horus offers the most familiar example of this motif, but the theme is universal in extent).]

Indeed, as I have documented, one of the defining characteristics of the "youth" in many cultures is the presence of a sacred lock of hair.⁵¹⁶ Upon the hero's exit from the dragon—in reality, the movement of Mars away from Venus and towards Earth, with the result that it now appeared outside of and beneath Venus—it follows that the planet-hero left behind his "sacred lock/hair" and thus became "bald." And thus it is that one of the defining events in many initiation rites celebrating the passage of youth features the clipping of the initiate's hair or sacred lock.

However we are to understand the situation in celestial terms, it can hardly be a coincidence that many of the great heroes of ancient myth are rendered bald as a result of some catastrophic event. We have already witnessed this theme in the case of Heracles, Cuchulainn, and Finn. The Assyrian epic *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, similarly, reports that Nergal became "bald" in the wake of his adventures upon the staircase of heaven.⁵¹⁷

THE DEATH OF HERACLES

If our theory of Heracles' planetary origins is to be taken seriously, it must be expected that it will elucidate otherwise obscure aspects of his cult or mythos. With this criterion in mind, we would offer the following chapter investigating the traditions surrounding the hero's death.

⁵¹⁶E. Cochrane, "Indra: A Case Study in Comparative Mythology," *Aeon* II:4 (1991), pp. 66-67. This is the original meaning of the Greek *kouros*, for example, signifying a youth whose hair is yet unshorn.

⁵¹⁷See the translation in B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 414-428. See also O. Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets," *Anatolian Studies* 10 (1960), pp. 121, 130.

Sophocles' *Trachiniae* is conventionally dated to 440-430 BCE, and as such it represents the oldest extant tragedy dealing with the cycle of Heracles.⁵¹⁸ The play also forms the most complete account of the events leading up to the hero's death, and thus it must figure prominently in any discussion of the hero's cult.

Opinions of the play vary extensively. It has been called "one of the boldest and most powerful creations of Greek dramatic poetry."⁵¹⁹ Other critics, however, have not been so kind. Sorum called it "a troublesome play."⁵²⁰ Its standard epithets, according to Segal, include "inferior, imperfect, very poor and insipid, gloomy, dark, puzzling, odd, nebulous, curious, bitter, difficult."⁵²¹

The play takes its name from its setting, Trachis, a city in the Malian plain, close to the border of Aetolia and Thessaly, to whence the family of Heracles had been exiled because of his treacherous murder of Iphitus.⁵²² The entire region was distinguished by its rich supply of hot springs, and it was this circumstance—coupled with its proximity to Mt. Oeta—which inspired Sophocles to choose Trachis for the setting of the play, Heracles being the patron god of hot springs.⁵²³

The plot of *Trachiniae* is simple enough. As the play opens Deianeira—the ever-faithful wife—awaits with her children for Heracles to return from his forced servitude at the hands of the Lydian queen Omphale. Rumors abound that Heracles has fallen madly in love with one Iole, whom he kidnapped upon sacking the kingdom of her father Eurytus. Upon hearing these reports, Deianeira plots to regain the hero's love. Remembering a love charm that had previously been given to her by Nessus—a centaur slain by a poisoned arrow from the bow of Heracles—Deianeira proceeds to apply it to a robe which she had been preparing for her husband. Upon learning that

⁵¹⁸On the date of the play see M. S. Silk, "Heracles and Greek Tragedy," *Greece and Rome* 32:1 (1985), p. 8. See also the discussion in P. E. Easterling, *Sophocles Trachiniae* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 19-23.

⁵¹⁹Charles Segal, "Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: myth, poetry, and heroic values," *YCS* 25 (1977), p. 100.

⁵²⁰C. Sorum, "Monsters and the Family: The Exodos of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 19:1 (1978), p. 59.

⁵²¹C. Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁵²²W. Oates & E. O'Neill, eds., *The Complete Greek Drama* (New York, 1938), p. 465.

⁵²³Indeed, Croon has observed that: "The entire scene of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* is dominated by these hot springs." See J. H. Croon, "Artemis Thermia and Apollo Thermios (With an excursus on the Oeteian Heracles-Cult)," *Mnemosyne* 9 (1956), p. 210.

Heracles is actually alive and well at Cape Caenaeum, Deianeira sends the royal messenger Lichas with the garment as a homecoming gift.

As it turns out, Deianeira was here acting as an unwitting dupe to Nessus in the latter's attempt to wreak vengeance upon the Greek strongman. And thus it is that Heracles—upon donning the robe in preparation for offering a sacrifice—finds that his body begins burning and corroding away as if under the influence of a powerful acid. Sophocles describes the hero's undoing as follows:

“At first, hapless one, he prayed with serene soul, rejoicing in his comely garb. But when the blood-fed flame began to blaze from the holy offerings and from the resinous pine, a sweat broke forth upon his flesh, and the tunic clung to his sides, at every joint, close-glued, as if by a craftsman's hand; there came a biting pain that racked his bones; and then the venom, as of some deadly, cruel viper, began to devour him.”⁵²⁴

The hydra's poison, in addition to inducing spasms of fiery pain, causes the hero's body to begin to waste away. As the horror of the scene builds to a fever pitch, Heracles is made to announce: “Glued to my sides, it [the garment] hath eaten my flesh to the inmost parts...already it hath drained my fresh life-blood, and my whole body is wasted.”⁵²⁵

The proud hero who had emerged unscathed from countless struggles with monsters and brigands—whose singular trademark is his powerfully formed body, hitherto impervious to pain—finds himself undone by a woman. Death alone offers hope of relief from the excruciating pain and Heracles elects to commit suicide by submitting to immolation upon a great pyre atop Mt. Oeta. As the hero prepares to go to his death, he laments his fallen state: “Behold! Look, all of you, on this miserable body; see how wretched, how piteous is my plight!”⁵²⁶

Despite its prominence in the play, the fiery death of Heracles—together with the mysterious disease which destroys his body—has received little discussion at the hands of commentators. In his long chapter on the tragic Heracles, for example, Galinsky offers nary a hint of the source of Sophocles' imagery.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁴764-771.

⁵²⁵1051-1057.

⁵²⁶1076-1080.

⁵²⁷G. Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 40-80.

Sophocles' depiction of Heracles as he lies writhing in agony, his body coming apart at the joints, is among the most disturbing and haunting in all of ancient Greek literature. Indeed several scholars have argued that the death-scene mars the play. The editors of *The Complete Greek Drama*, for example, observed:

"The closing scenes which present the sufferings of the dying Heracles constitute a serious defect of the play...Sophocles in the latter part of the play seems to have become so preoccupied with presenting Heracles' physical agony that he loses sight of Deianeira, his truly great tragic creation, and the artistic integrity of the whole piece is correspondingly impaired."⁵²⁸

Linforth, similarly, suggested that the hero's death on the funeral pyre was appended at the end of the play in order to conform with the traditional account of the hero's death, much to the detriment of the unity of the play. Of Sophocles' deference to tradition, this critic observed:

"He has written a play which is marked by the ingenuity of the plot and by the delicate art with which he has depicted the character and changing moods of Deianeira and the grim personality of Heracles. The motivation is sound throughout—until he comes to the final scene. The whole logic of the play demands that Heracles shall die from the effects of the poisoned robe. But instead of this he is sent to die on the pyre in a manner utterly unprepared for, and in a manner for which no cause or purpose is adduced. The play comes to an end with a scene which has no organic connection with what precedes.

It is not difficult to explain this extraordinary circumstance. Heracles must die, but Sophocles cannot allow him to die of poison when it is an established fact that he died on the pyre. There is no legend telling of any form of death for Heracles other than that on Mount Oeta. He had no grave in the Greek world. The outcome which the audience has been led to anticipate as inevitable must give place to a conclusion which is fixed in legend as a historical fact."⁵²⁹

The obvious question which presents itself is what possessed a master like Sophocles to so dwell upon the agony of Heracles? And from whence did he receive the inspiration for the bizarre imagery of the hero's "disease"?

⁵²⁸W. Oates & E. O'Neill, *op. cit.*, pp. 463-464.

⁵²⁹I. Linforth, "The Pyre on Mount Oeta," *University of California Publications in Classical Philology* 14 (1950-52), p. 261.

GREEK EPIC, RITUAL, AND THE ORIGINS OF TRAGEDY

It is well-known that the various tragedians chose their subject matter from the vast corpus of epic myths, which was then selectively molded to suit their particular purposes.⁵³⁰ In the present play, for example, Sophocles adapts the traditional tale of Heracles' winning of Deianeira with his conquest of Acheloos. To this episode Sophocles has wedded incidents from Heracles' conflict with Iphitus and Eurytus, although these events were originally unconnected with the myth of Acheloos.

There are several additional innovations which we may credit to Sophocles. He has made Deianeira an older woman, for example, in contrast to her status as virginal ingenue in the original myth.⁵³¹ It would also appear that Sophocles has invented the death of Nessus through poisonous arrows—the older monuments depicting this scene show Heracles with a sword or club—in order to provide an aetiology for the poison which stained Heracles' robe.⁵³² For the poisonous garment itself there is a prior reference, in the Hesiodic catalogue.⁵³³ Otherwise, most of the central motifs of *Trachiniae* can be shown to have been in existence in one form or another as early as the seventh century BCE; Sophocles' play can thus be seen as an attempt to integrate the independent mythical traditions into a coherent whole.

From this brief sketch of the primary elements of Sophocles' play it can be seen that he combined different traditions from the cycle of Heracles, altering them in various significant ways. The death of Heracles by fire, however, was traditional and was presumably altered but little. Although Heracles' pyre appears on Attic vases prior to Sophocles' play, it must be admitted that there is very little literary evidence for the hero's immolation before Sophocles.⁵³⁴ Some obscure fragments ascribed to Aeschylus' *Herakleidae* seem to describe the building of the pyre by the hero's

⁵³⁰J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Trachiniae* (Leiden, 1970), p. 7.

⁵³¹C. Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁵³²O. Gruppe, "Herakles," *RE Supplement III* (Stuttgart, 1918), col. 1086.

⁵³³Fragment 25:20-33. See also J. Kamerbeek, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

⁵³⁴See the discussion in I. Linforth, *op. cit.*, pp. 261-262. Heracles' pyre first appears in art around 460 BCE. See J. Boardman, "Heracles in Extremis," in K. Schauenberg, *Studien zur Mythologie und Vasenmalerei* (Berlin, 1986), p. 129. See also P. Holt, "The End of the Trachiniai and the Fate of Heracles," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 (1989), pp. 73ff.

children.⁵³⁵ Herodotus had alluded to the tradition of Heracles' immolation in his *History*.⁵³⁶ Sophocles himself would later refer to the hero's fiery death in *Philoctetes*.⁵³⁷ Nothing in these accounts, however, hints at the source of the tradition.

A decisive clue, perhaps, is to be sought in early ritual, for, in addition to its debt to epic tradition, it has long been known that Greek drama originally commemorated actual religious practices of early Greece. Here Murray observed:

"Greek tragedy, strictly speaking, was a peculiar form of art with narrow limits, both local and temporary. It was, in literal meaning, a 'goat song,' i.e. a *molpe* (dance and song combined), performed at the altar of Dionysus over the sacrifice of a dismembered goat, which, by a form of symbolism common in ancient religion, represented the god himself...Its subjects might be taken from any part of the Greek heroic tradition; but normally the play portrayed some traditional story which was treated as the *Aition* or origin of some existing religious practice. For example, if it was the custom on a certain day to carry the coffin of Ajax to burial...Sophocles would write a tragedy representing the madness, crime, and death of Ajax, and the great discussion about the heroic criminal's dead body, in which by the pleading of his old enemy Odysseus he is at last granted the rites of honorable burial. That would explain the origin of the custom."⁵³⁸

That there was, in fact, a cult celebrating the ritual immolation of Heracles has only recently been confirmed. In 1920, archaeologists working at a site upon Mt. Oeta discovered effigy-like figurines of the great hero which had apparently been subjected to repeated firings.⁵³⁹ Judging from the artifacts found at the site, the cult persisted from at least the 6th century BCE well into Roman times.⁵⁴⁰ Upon the discovery of the Oetean cult, Nilsson drew the now generally accepted conclusion that the rite had given rise to the myth of the hero's immolation:

⁵³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵³⁶7:198

⁵³⁷728-729

⁵³⁸G. Murray, *Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1940), pp. 1-2.

⁵³⁹H. Shapiro, "*Heros Theos: The Death and Apotheosis of Herakles*," *Classical World* 77:1 (1983), p. 15.

⁵⁴⁰J. Croon, "Artemis Thermia and Apollo Thermios (With an excursus on the Oetean Heracles-Cult)," *Mnemosyne* 9 (1956), p. 212. Boardman would place the origin of the local cult at Oeta "long before the sixth century." See J. Boardman, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

“Such a bonfire was kindled on the top of Mount Oeta and the figure burned on the pyre was called Heracles. This is proved by early inscriptions and statuettes of Heracles. So the myth of Heracles’ death in the flames of the pyre on Mount Oeta was created and connected with the magnificent but late myth of Deianeira.”⁵⁴¹

Nilsson’s thesis, unfortunately, leaves unanswered the origin of the ritual itself or why it was connected to Heracles, and thus only removes the mystery one step back. This said, there can be little doubt that there was some relation between the cult upon Oeta and Sophocles’ remarkable tragedy.⁵⁴²

MELQART

Here it is interesting to note that prior to the discovery of the cult upon Mt. Oeta several scholars—James Frazer being among the most notable—had deduced the existence of rites in which the burning of Heracles constituted the central performance, citing parallels from the ancient Near East.⁵⁴³ Rites of immolation are alluded to in the cult of Melqart, for example, commonly called the Tyrian Heracles.⁵⁴⁴ Of this god, Burkert observed: “Since Herodotus, the equation of Heracles with the Phoenician god Melqart has been beyond question.”⁵⁴⁵

Given the extent of Phoenician colonizing ventures, the cult of Melqart eventually became disseminated throughout the Mediterranean—from Cyprus to Sardinia (Italy) to Utica (N. Africa) to Gades/Tartessos (Spain). The fact that Melqart is mentioned on an Aramaen stele of the ninth century BCE suggests that his cult was not confined to Phoenician colonies, but enjoyed a wider province than hitherto recognized.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴¹M. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (New York, 1963), p. 205.

⁵⁴²Scholars have noted that Sophocles had a deep affinity with the cults of the various heroes. Susan Woodford, “Cults of Heracles in Attica,” in *Studies Presented to George M.A. Hanfmann* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 220, observes that Sophocles “in his dramas revived old myths and in his life revived old cults.”

⁵⁴³J. Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* (London, 1919), pp. 110-187. Frazer’s discussion of Melqart’s cult remains the best available in English. See also O. Gruppe, “Herakles,” *RE Supplement III* (Stuttgart, 1918), col. 1089.

⁵⁴⁴This identification goes back to Herodotus 2:44. See also Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, I:10:27. There is also a bilingual inscription in Malta which refers to Heracles/Melqart as the founder—*archegetes*—of Tyre. See R. de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, 1971), p. 244.

⁵⁴⁵W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 210.

⁵⁴⁶W. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, 1953), p. 196; R. de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, 1971), p. 239.

Of Melqart's cult and rites, precious little is known.⁵⁴⁷ It has been claimed, in fact, that "Melqart's personality eludes research."⁵⁴⁸ Most of our information, such as it is, comes from Greek and Roman sources. According to pseudo-Clementines, people used to speak of a place near Tyre where Heracles/Melqart had been consumed in flames.⁵⁴⁹ Representations of the god at Pyrgi likewise show him enveloped in flames.⁵⁵⁰ From Menander by way of Josephus, we learn that in the spring the Tyrians typically celebrated the "awakening" of Heracles/Melqart.⁵⁵¹ Although the nature of the Tyrian rite remains obscure, it appears to have involved a periodic rejuvenation of the god—witness the phrase "having lost his old age in fire [the god] obtains in exchange his youth."⁵⁵²

Frazer offered the following opinion about the relationship of the cult of Melqart to Heracles:

"The foregoing evidence, taken together, raises a strong presumption, though it cannot be said to amount to a proof, that a practice of burning a deity and especially Melqarth, in effigy or in the person of a human representative, was observed at an annual festival in Tyre and its colonies. We can understand how Hercules in so far as he represented the Tyrian god, was believed to have perished by a voluntary death on a pyre. For on many a beach and headland of the Aegean, where the Phoenicians had their trading factories, the Greeks may have watched the bale-fires of Melqarth blazing in the darkness of night, and have learned with wonder that the strange folk were burning their god. In this way the legend of the voyages of Hercules and his death in the flames may be supposed to have originated. Yet with the legend the Greeks borrowed the custom of burning the god; for at festivals of Hercules a pyre used to be kindled in memory of the hero's fiery death on Mount Oeta. We may surmise, though we are not expressly told, that an effigy of Hercules was regularly burned on the pyre."⁵⁵³

⁵⁴⁷For a summary of the available evidence see W. Kroll, "Melkart," *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), pp. 293-297.

⁵⁴⁸J. Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra* (Leiden, 1979), p. 112.

⁵⁴⁹R. de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

⁵⁵⁰W. Burkert, "Oriental and Greek Mythology: The Meeting of Parallels," in J. Bremmer ed., *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (Totowa, N.J., 1989), p. 36.

⁵⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 36, citing Menandros, Fragment 783 F 1. See also Josephus, *Antiquities* 8:5:3.

⁵⁵²See the discussion in S. Langdon, "Semitic Mythology," in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (New York, 1964), p. 52.

⁵⁵³J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

Frazer's argument, as always, is documented with a wealth of evidence. Even so it is most doubtful that mere imitation of the rites of Melqart can account for the grand myth of Heracles' immolation. Rather, it is Melqart's identification with Nergal confirmed by the fact that Assyrian scribes used the same ideogram to designate both gods⁵⁵⁴—which offers the decisive clue for reconstructing the original significance of Heracles' "death." The identification of Melqart and Nergal would appear perfectly logical, Nergal himself—as we have seen—being elsewhere identified with Heracles.⁵⁵⁵

In addition to his role as a god of war, Nergal was also invoked as the King of the Underworld, his very name signifying as much: "Lord of the Big City."⁵⁵⁶ Inasmuch as the name Melqart signifies "King of the City," Albright was led to suggest that Melqart too was a god of the Underworld.⁵⁵⁷ Other scholars, however, maintain that Melqart's name signifies the "King of Tyre."⁵⁵⁸

In lieu of the identification of Nergal and Heracles with the planet Mars, it is significant to find that the same planet appears to have been associated with Melqart. Thus, Arab authors speak of the sanctuary at Tyre as being specially consecrated to the planet Mars.⁵⁵⁹

MELIKERTES

The Tyrian god Melqart has often been recognized in the Greek hero Melikertes.⁵⁶⁰ The latter figure is best known, perhaps, from the peculiar myth of his

⁵⁵⁴H. Seyrig, "Antiquites Syriennes," *Syria* 64 (1944-1945), p. 70. S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1989), p. 164, states that: "The name of Melqart...is a Phoenician translation of the Sumerian name Nergal, and thus they are very closely assimilated."

⁵⁵⁵H. Seyrig, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁵⁵⁶E. Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 4. On the meaning of Nergal's name see also W.G. Lambert, "Studies in Nergal," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 30:5/6 (1973), p. 356; and P. Steinkeller, "The Name of Nergal," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 77 (1987), p. 167.

⁵⁵⁷W. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, 1953), pp. 81, 196. See also R. de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

⁵⁵⁸For the arguments bearing on this question see C. Bonnet, *Melqart* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 20-21; G. Heider, *The Cult of Molek* (Trowbridge, 1985), pp. 175-179.

⁵⁵⁹H. Seyrig, "Antiquites Syriennes," *Syria* 64 (1944-1945), p. 70. Note also that ancient representations of Melqart occasionally include a star set next to the god. See W. Culican, "Melqart Representations on Phoenician Seals," *Abr-Nahrain* 2 (1960/61), p. 48.

⁵⁶⁰J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 113. A more recent discussion of the evidence bearing on this issue is offered in M. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1967), pp. 209-212. For dissenting opinions see L. Farnell,

“boiling” at the hands of his mother. Here Apollodorus reports that Ino, upon being stricken with a great madness, plunged Melikertes into a seething kettle of water, after which she leapt into the sea together with the infant.⁵⁶¹ Although little else remains of this curious myth, it is known that it formed a prominent theme in several tragedies no longer extant.⁵⁶²

Melikertes was elsewhere linked with the foundation legend of the Isthmian games.⁵⁶³ This cultic association, according to most scholars, accounts for the otherwise mysterious epithet *Palaimon*, signifying the “wrestler,” given to Melikertes.⁵⁶⁴

Upon the Greek island of Tenedos, there was a cult of *Palaimon* “the child-killer,” involving, it would appear, the sacrifice of children.⁵⁶⁵ This fact, if nothing else, should alert us to the possibility that Melikertes was not the innocent babe that Apollodorus presents. One is naturally reminded here of the Biblical injunctions against the rites of Moloch (the latter name being cognate with Melqart and thus, presumably, with Melikertes) and/or Chemosh, both of whom were propitiated with rites of child sacrifice.⁵⁶⁶ To be more precise, both of these gods were offered children as burnt offerings.⁵⁶⁷

Here it is significant to find that Moloch and Chemosh both appear as epithets of Nergal in Assyrian god-lists.⁵⁶⁸ This would appear to offer some justification for understanding the hero Melikertes as but a pale reflection of Melqart/Nergal and suggests the possibility that the boiling infant was himself offered infants as burnt offerings.

Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality (Oxford, 1921), p. 41; C. Bonnet, *Melqart* (Leuven, 1988), p. 390.

⁵⁶¹Apollodorus 3:4:3. For other references see Lesky, “Melikertes,” *RE* 15:1 (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), col. 515.

⁵⁶²*Ibid.*, col. 518.

⁵⁶³Pausanias I:44:11.

⁵⁶⁴Apollodorus 3:4:3; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4:520, 13:919. See also L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵⁶⁵Lykophron 229, with scholiast; Philostratus, *Heroica* 19. See also the discussion in L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁵⁶⁶*Leviticus* 18:21, 20:2; *I Kings* 11:7; *2 Kings* 13:10; *Jeremiah* 32:35

⁵⁶⁷The Greek Ares likewise was offered human beings as burnt offerings. See the discussion in L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. 5 (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 397.

⁵⁶⁸On the relation of Nergal to these two gods, see J. Curtis, “An Investigation of the Mount of Olives in the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *HUCA* 28 (1957), pp. 142-150.

Now it can hardly be a coincidence that Heracles also bore the name *Palaimon* nor that he, too, became associated with the founding of various athletic contests such as the Olympic games.⁵⁶⁹ It is also intriguing to note that Heracles is said to have murdered his own children and cast them into a fire, a veiled reference, quite possibly, to Molochian rites.⁵⁷⁰ However we answer this question, there can be no doubt that Heracles, like Melikertes, was a “child-killer.” Such considerations attest to the fundamental affinity of Heracles and Melikertes—otherwise likely due to their mutual identity with Melqart—and lead inevitably to the question: Is Melikertes’ “boiling” but a mythical variation upon the burning of Heracles atop Mt. Oeta?⁵⁷¹

That such is indeed the case is supported by the fact that several other heroes whose careers parallel that of Heracles also endure a “boiling” after the fashion of Melikertes. Perhaps the most famous account is that involving Pelops, who was offered up by his father Tantalus in a stew at a banquet for the gods (notice again the possible veiled reference to Molochian rites).⁵⁷² Upon finding out the horrible truth of Tantalus’ offering, Zeus immediately ordered that Pelops be revived by boiling him in a magical cauldron.

A similar tale was elsewhere reported of Jason, whose resemblance to Heracles is commonly acknowledged.⁵⁷³ According to the various scholiasts’ accounts, Jason was once rejuvenated by means of a dip in a fiery cauldron at the hands of Medea.⁵⁷⁴

Of decisive importance for the interpretation of Melikertes’ “boiling” is a famous cista from Praeneste, in which the Latin god Mars is depicted as an infant emerging

⁵⁶⁹On the epithet, see Lykophron 663; on Heracles’ association with the founding of the Olympic games, see Pausanias 5:7:4ff. See also W. Ensslin, “Palaimon,” *RE* 18:2 (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), col. 2447.

⁵⁷⁰Apollodorus II:4:12; Diodorus 4:11:1. See also the discussion in F. Prinz, “Herakles,” *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), cols. 186-193. The evidence presented above, taken together, suggests the possibility that the name Palaimon traces to Baal Hammon, the leading god of Carthage famous for his Molochian rites. This suggestion appears to go back to R. Eisler, and receives additional support from the fact that Heracles was identified with Baal Hammon. See Polybius 7:9:2. On this question, see the discussion in M. Astour, *op. cit.*, p. 210; and S. Langdon, “Semitic Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (New York, 1964), p. 53.

⁵⁷¹U. von Wilamowitz long ago called attention to the assimilation of Heracles to Melikertes. See O. Gruppe, “Herakles,” *RE Supplement III* (Stuttgart, 1918), col. 1003.

⁵⁷²Pindar, *Olympian Odes* I:37-40. See also the discussion of Lesky, *op. cit.*, col. 515.

⁵⁷³R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1970), p. 240.

from a vat of boiling water (see Figure X).⁵⁷⁵ This scene, which dates to the fourth century BCE and has close parallels in Etruscan mirrors of the subsequent century, has typically been interpreted as either a fiery baptism *ala* that of Demophoon at the hands of Demeter, or as a magical resuscitation after the fashion of Jason and Pelops.⁵⁷⁶ The cista from Praeneste would appear to raise the possibility of a relationship between the boiling child and the planet Mars—provided, that is, that one can accept the identity of the Latin god with the planet of that name.

The identification of the Latin god with Heracles, coupled with their mutual identification with the red planet, would appear to bring our argument full circle. Whether one considers the immolation of Heracles from the vantage-point offered by the burning of Melqart/Nergal, or from that offered by the boiling infants Melikertes and Mars, a common denominator persists—the same explicit association of the burning figure with the red planet.⁵⁷⁷

HERACLES WASTED

How are we to understand the tradition that Heracles suffered horribly from a wasting disease prior to his immolation? As we will document in a subsequent chapter, numerous warrior-heroes are said to have endured an episode of “wasting” or “withering.” A decisive clue is provided by the fact that Nergal suffered from a similar affliction. Thus, in the Assyrian myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, the war-god is said to have become withered or otherwise deformed upon climbing the heavenly

⁵⁷⁴Scholiast to Aristophanes’ *Equites* 1321; scholiast to Lykophron 1315. See also the discussion in J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁵⁷⁵See the discussion of H. Wagenvoort, “The Origin of the Ludi Saeculares,” in *Studies in Roman Literature, Culture and Religion* (New York, 1978), pp. 212-232.

⁵⁷⁶On the baptism of Demophoon see the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 239ff. See also W. Roscher, “Mars,” *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 2408.

⁵⁷⁷The cults of Heracles, Mars, and Melqart share another important feature in common—namely, a prohibition of females. This is reported for the cult of Heracles in general, see L. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921), p. 162; for Mars Silvanus in Italy, see G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1970), p. 235; and for Melqart upon Gades, see J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 112. Significantly, the same prohibition was also reported of the Hindu god identified with the planet Mars—Karttikeya. See A. Chatterjee, *The Cult of Skanda-Karttikeya in Ancient India* (Calcutta, 1970), p. 103. The same prohibition was found in the cult of the Greek Ares. See Pausanias 3:22:5.

stairway to the kingdom of the gods.⁵⁷⁸ A glance at the terms employed by the ancient poet to describe the contortions undergone by Nergal reveals an image not unlike that of Heracles whilst in the throes of his Oetean agony: *qu-bu-hu*, “to become stunted, shrink, shrivel up;” *su-un-dur*, “to roll or twist one’s eyes;” *pu-us-sul*, “bent, crooked.”⁵⁷⁹

Note further that the respective afflictions of Nergal and Heracles are both linked to an ascension to heaven. In the case of Nergal, it is only upon ascending to heaven that the god becomes transfigured. Heracles’ immolation upon Oeta, similarly, is said to have precipitated the hero’s ascension to heaven whereupon he was granted immortality.⁵⁸⁰ Central to the Greek tradition of Heracles’ apotheosis is the belief that the hero ascended to heaven and forthwith joined his fellow Olympians, a picture not unlike Nergal’s ascension of the heavenly “stairway” to the assembly of the gods.

It is probable that such traditions have a deeper significance than hitherto realized. If we view the career of the warrior-hero from the perspective provided by the thesis of the polar configuration, it can be deduced that the ascension of Nergal/Heracles refers to the movement of the planet Mars away from the Earth towards the assembly of the gods, literally the enclosure associated with Saturn. Such a movement would result in a gradual diminishment in the apparent size of the planet-god, contributing, no doubt, to traditions of the warrior-hero’s withering.⁵⁸¹

Traditions which have Heracles experience a “rebirth” or rejuvenation in the wake of his apotheosis lead to a similar conclusion.⁵⁸² Here it should be obvious that as Mars receded from the Earth it would appear to resume its former position as a child or “infant” of the much larger Venus and Saturn.⁵⁸³ Indeed, it is likely that Mars appeared to visually enter the orb of Venus, thereby reentering the Venusian “womb”

⁵⁷⁸E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 52. See also the discussion in J. V. Wilson, *The Rebel Lands* (London, 1979) p. 98. For a translation of the text, see O. Gurney, “The Sultantepe Tablets,” *Anatolian Studies* 10 (1960), pp. 125, 130.

⁵⁷⁹E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁵⁸⁰O. Gruppe, *op. cit.*, col. 1090.

⁵⁸¹The loss of Mars’ atmosphere could have lead to a similar conception, perhaps. Thus, there is reason to believe that during the spectacular events associated with the evolution of the polar configuration, Mars lost a significant portion of its once-plentiful atmosphere.

⁵⁸²See the discussion in C. Kerenyi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (New York, 1959), pp. 203-204.

as it were. It is in this manner that we would understand the curious tradition whereby Heracles, upon ascending to heaven, was greeted by Hera (Venus⁵⁸⁴) who forthwith made a show of “redelivering” her hated youngster.⁵⁸⁵ Etruscan vases, with apparent reference to this tradition, depict the hero as an infant nursing at the breast of the Queen of Heaven. Heracles’ “rejuvenation” shortly after his immolation, needless to say, offers a remarkable parallel to the traditions associated with Pelops, Jason, and Mars, each of whom experienced a rejuvenating metamorphosis upon being boiled.

HERACLES AS DAKTYL

The same celestial scenario will also resolve a long-standing anomaly in the cult of Heracles—namely, his appearance as a Daktyl or dwarf. This tradition—so difficult to reconcile with the gigantic form typically attributed to the Greek strongman—inspired Diodorus, among others, to distinguish between the Daktyl Heracles and the son of Zeus/Alcmene.⁵⁸⁶ Modern scholars have likewise questioned the authenticity of this tradition, some explaining it as a pious fraud,⁵⁸⁷ others as a contamination from the East.⁵⁸⁸

The truth is that Heracles’ status as a Daktyl is well-attested in Greek cult. It was in this form that the hero founded the Olympic games, for example.⁵⁸⁹ Heracles the Daktyl is elsewhere found in close association with the cult of the mother goddess. In Mykalessos, Heracles served as the doorkeeper to Demeter.⁵⁹⁰ In Arcadia, similarly, Heracles was represented in cult by a diminutive statue (one cubit high) set next to a

⁵⁸³On this aspect of Mars’ history see D. Talbott, “Mother Goddess and Warrior-Hero,” *Aeon* I:5 (1988), pp. 48-59; E. Cochrane, “Indra: A Case Study in Comparative Mythology,” *Aeon* II:4 (1991), pp. 64-76.

⁵⁸⁴On Hera’s identification with Venus, see K. Kerényi, *Goddesses of Sun and Moon* (Dallas, 1979), p. 59.

⁵⁸⁵Diodorus Siculus 4:39:2.

⁵⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 3:73.

⁵⁸⁷L. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921), p. 129.

⁵⁸⁸See the valuable discussion by C. Bonnet, *Melqart* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 380-390.

⁵⁸⁹Diodorus III:74:4; Pausanias V:7:7.

⁵⁹⁰Pausanias IX:19:4-5. The same role is ascribed to Apollo, Reseph, and countless other hero/gods identifiable with the planet Mars. See E. Cochrane, “Apollo and the Planet Mars,” *Aeon* I:1 (1988), p. 60.

colossal statue of Demeter.⁵⁹¹ Pindar, perhaps with reference to the hero's Daktyl nature, referred to Heracles as "short," a statement which shocked the ancients.⁵⁹²

The archetypal nature of Heracles' Daktyl-form is further supported by his early assimilation to Bes, a god of unknown origin who is abundantly attested in Egyptian art as a dwarf with bandy legs and wrinkled face.⁵⁹³ The cults of Heracles and Bes share numerous features in common. Egyptian illustrations of the dwarf-god show him with a lion-skin draped about his shoulders, its tail extending down along the god's back and protruding between his legs, much as Heracles was depicted in Greek art.⁵⁹⁴ Bes was elsewhere represented with arms outstretched strangling serpents, as was the infant Heracles.⁵⁹⁵ Like Heracles, Bes was a popular figure upon amulets, invoked as the "averted of evil."⁵⁹⁶

Bonnet, upon noting that the Daktyl Heracles was identified with Melqart by the Greeks themselves⁵⁹⁷, suggested that the cult of Bes mediated the assimilation between the two figures, presumably on Cyprus, a well-known melting pot of oriental and Greek ideas.

Significantly, Bes was addressed as "the rejuvenated one," and described as "the old man who renews his youth and the Aged One who maketh himself a boy again."⁵⁹⁸ This report, needless to say, offers a remarkable parallel to the Phoenician rite of Melqart/Heracles, whereby it was reported that the god "having lost his old age in fire obtains in exchange his youth." Nor can we overlook the parallel with

⁵⁹¹*Ibid.*, VIII:31:3.

⁵⁹²*Isthmian Odes*, 56. See here the discussion of L. Farnell, *Critical Commentary to the Works of Pindar* (Amsterdam, 1965), p. 354, who remarks: "He says absolutely...that Herakles was a little man...Could Pindar have been thinking, not of the Hellenic Herakles but of the dwarf 'Daktuloi' of Crete and the Cretan Herakles?"

⁵⁹³The assimilation of Heracles and Bes has long drawn the attention of scholars. See, for example, the discussion in A. Palmer, *The Samson-Saga* (New York, 1977), pp. 227-230.

⁵⁹⁴On the iconography of the god, see V. Wilson, "The Iconography of Bes with Particular Reference to the Cypriot Evidence," *Levant* 7 (1975), pp. 77-103. See also V. Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 55-83.

⁵⁹⁵H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), p. 103.

⁵⁹⁶A. Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁵⁹⁷Pausanias IX:27:6-8. The iconography of the Daktyl and Melqart converges on several points as well. Both figures were represented sailing across the seas in a vessel of some sort, for example. Melqart is elsewhere represented riding a flying horse, as was Heracles in Etruscan art. See C. Bonnet, *Melqart* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 385-390.

⁵⁹⁸A. Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 228. See also H. Bonnet, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

Heracles' rejuvenation upon his apotheosis.⁵⁹⁹ Indeed, it was because of his rejuvenation upon immolation that Nonnus compared the Greek strongman to the Phoenix.⁶⁰⁰

Several other features of Bes' cult are of interest here. Intimately associated with dance, music, and mirth, Bes frequently appears as a merry-making attendant of the mother goddess, not unlike the Daktyls in Greek tradition.⁶⁰¹ Yet, as his function of averter of evil and protector of the household would imply, Bes could also take on a warrior aspect, being frequently depicted brandishing a sword. Indeed, Bes was elsewhere identified with Horus, especially in the form of Horus as child (the Greek Harpocrates), the Egyptian war-god likewise being depicted as a dwarf with twisted limbs.⁶⁰²

Although typically described as a dwarf, Bes could elsewhere assume gargantuan proportions. In the *Brooklyn Magical Papyrus*, for example, Bes is described as a "giant of a million cubits" who "carries the sky with his powerful arms."⁶⁰³ Thus it is that on various monuments Bes can be found replacing Shu as the upholder of heaven, much as Heracles replaced Atlas.⁶⁰⁴

While it would be impossible to do justice to the Bes-traditions with this brief survey of his role in Egyptian religion, our thesis does raise the possibility of resolving the hitherto obscure basis of this god's relationship to Heracles. Both gods were represented as dwarfs and said to be capable of rejuvenation for the simple reason that both originated as personifications of the planet Mars, which—in a spectacular series of events witnessed by prehistoric man the world over—appeared to shrink in size as it ascended the polar column. The Daktyls' traditional status as daemon-like attendants of the great mother goddess—like Heracles'/Bes' intimate

⁵⁹⁹On the iconography of Heracles' rejuvenation see J. Boardman, "Heracles in Extremis," in K. Schauenberg, *Studien zur Mythologie und Vasenmalerei* (Berlin, 1986), p. 129.

⁶⁰⁰*Dionysiaca*, XL:394-398.

⁶⁰¹On the cult of Bes see H. Bonnet, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-109. See also E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol. II (New York, 1969), pp. 284-288.

⁶⁰²E. Budge, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

⁶⁰³V. Dasen, *op. cit.*, p. 52. In her discussion of Egyptian dwarf-gods, Dasen (p. 51) notes that: "In many spells, they are described as a 'great dwarf', short, but rising from earth to sky, as if they could be small and gigantic at the same time."

association with the goddess—is best explained as reflecting the close proximity of the diminutive Mars to Venus when at the apex of its movement along the polar axis. If one interpretation saw Heracles experiencing a rejuvenation at the breast of Hera, another regarded him as the dwarf-like attendant of Demeter. This latter image—based as it was on a celestial prototype—was aptly commemorated in the aforementioned Arcadian cult whereby a diminutive statue of Heracles was placed next to a colossal image of Demeter.

BATRAZ

If indeed the myth of Heracles' immolation traces to a cataclysmic spectacle associated with the planet Mars, it stands to reason that other cultures—witnessing the same celestial panorama—would preserve similar traditions. The myth of the burning hero, in fact, can be found around the globe.

Consider the example provided by Batraz, a Heracles-like hero of the Ossetes, a Caucasian people currently living in Russia who are apparently the last surviving speakers of a Scythian (i.e., North Iranian) dialect.⁶⁰⁵ This strong-armed hero was said to be capable of uprooting stout trees with his bare hands. The immolation of Batraz occurs early in his career; indeed several traditions report that the hero was born enveloped in fire. In obvious torment, the incandescent-babe implores:

“Faster, faster! Fetch me water! I feel a flame of fire in me, an inextinguishable conflagration which devours me...”⁶⁰⁶

To help alleviate the child's suffering, his elders attempt to dunk him in vats of water: “Like a spout filling everything with flame, the child—a child of blazing steel—drops headlong to the seven cauldrons below; but they are unable to cool him.” It is only with great difficulty that the hero's aunt eventually succeeds in cooling him. Thereafter the hero assumes a steel-like form, his body having been tempered by the waters.

⁶⁰⁴H. Bonnet, op. cit., p. 108. Shu, of course, was elsewhere identified with Heracles. See R. Roeder, “Schow,” *RML* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 566.

⁶⁰⁵See the discussion in C. Lyttleton & A. Thomas, “The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends,” *Journal of American Folklore* 91 (1978), pp. 512-527.

⁶⁰⁶G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 138.

It can hardly be denied that the image of Batraz being consumed by an “inextinguishable conflagration” bears a remarkable parallel to the torment suffered by Heracles, in which his body was consumed by the venomous poison of the hydra, the latter’s venom being explicitly described by Sophocles as a plague of fire. Indeed the parallels extend to the finest details. Note that in an attempt to extinguish the corrosive effects of the hydra’s poison, Heracles likewise sought relief from water, leaping into a nearby stream:

“His blood hissed and bubbled like spring water when red-hot metal is tempered. He plunged headlong into the nearest stream, but the poison only burned fiercer; these waters have been scalding hot ever since.”⁶⁰⁷

The comparison of Heracles’ incandescent dive to the tempering of metal is most significant in light of the report that Batraz is likewise said to have been tempered into a steel-like form via fire and water.⁶⁰⁸

The fundamental affinity of Heracles and Batraz is confirmed by several other traditions. Thus, Ossetic myth relates that Batraz was repulsive to look at.⁶⁰⁹ While this is certainly a surprising statement to find recorded about one’s national hero, it accords precisely with the horrible spectacle offered by the diseased Heracles, his body corroding away as if suffering from the effects of leprosy. Most intriguing, perhaps, is the tradition whereby the Ossetic hero was fated to be immolated upon a great funeral pyre.⁶¹⁰

It is commonly acknowledged that the Ossetes, as a result of their relative isolation in the Caucasus mountains, have managed to preserve a wealth of archaic traditions. Georges Dumézil, one of the leading experts on Ossetic myth and tradition, prefaced his analysis of the Batraz cycle with the following observation: “This hero of the Nart legends, if one may rely on certain strong indications, has taken

⁶⁰⁷R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol. II (New York, 1970), p. 201. This legend is often cited as an aetiology for the widespread association of Heracles with sacred hot springs.

⁶⁰⁸G. Dumézil, *Legendes sur Les Nartes* (Paris, 1930), p. 54.

⁶⁰⁹*Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁶¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 73.

upon himself and thereby conserved a part of the mythology of the ‘Scythian Ares,’ the latter, in the last analysis, an heir of the Indo-Iranian Indra.”⁶¹¹

Most significant for our thesis, however, is the explicit placement of Batraz in the sky. Thus, it is said of the fiery-natured hero that: “The child will henceforth live in the sky, from which he will descend in a burst, incandescent as at his birth, whenever some danger or scandal threatens his kin.”⁶¹² On such occasions when Batraz becomes furious and descends from heaven, it is said that he is wont to assume a brilliant red form.⁶¹³ As a red celestial body, and as the Ossetic counterpart of the Greek Ares, Batraz is properly identified with the planet Mars.

[An intriguing parallel to the plight of Batraz can be found in aboriginal Australian myth.⁶¹⁴ There the hero Waijungari finds himself the victim of an arsonist, who sets fire to the hero’s tent in revenge for one of his many indiscretions. In an attempt to escape the raging fire, the hero plunges into a nearby river and later, upon exiting the river, he casts a spear to the heavens, which he then uses as a ladder to ascend to safety.

As in the case of Heracles, the burning of Waijungari is associated with an ascension to heaven. Although it would be rash to conclude from this brief account that the Australian myth offers an exact parallel of Heracles’ immolation, it does contain a motif of interest here: It is reported that upon ascending to heaven Waijungari became the planet Mars.⁶¹⁵]

Significantly, a similar picture is presented in ancient literature. *The Poem of Erra*, for example, tells of an armed insurrection led by Erra—an alter ego of Nergal—against the assembly of the gods.⁶¹⁶ According to this poem, the very foundations of heaven were threatened by Erra’s assault. Inasmuch as several of the

⁶¹¹G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 137.

⁶¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

⁶¹³G. Dumézil, *Legendes sur Les Nartes* (Paris, 1930), p. 58.

⁶¹⁴W. Tinsdale, “The Legend of Waijungari...,” *Records of the South Australian Museum* 5:3 (1935), pp. 261-274. I am indebted to Allan Beggs for this reference (by way of Dave Talbott). See Talbott’s discussion of this myth in “Servant of the Sun-God,” *Aeon* II:1 (1990), pp. 47-48.

⁶¹⁵W. Tinsdale, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

⁶¹⁶For an analysis of this poem, see E. Cochrane, “The Poem of Erra,” in *Aeon* I:5 (1988), pp. 66-79.

most ancient traditions surrounding Heracles involve an assault upon the inhabitants of Olympus, an examination of Erra's uprising warrants our attention.

ERRA

Discovered in the nineteenth century, the *Poem of Erra* is one of the most remarkable documents which have come down to us from ancient times. Judging by its diffusion throughout the ancient Near East, it was also one of the most popular poems of antiquity.⁶¹⁷

The subject of the poem is Erra's attack upon Suanna, the heavenly kingdom of Marduk. Erra's dire intentions are made known early on in the poem: "I will make prince Marduk wrathful: I will cause him to rise from his seat and I will fell the men."⁶¹⁸ Later on in the poem, Erra makes good on his threat: His revolt not only causes Marduk to rise from his seat, but to abdicate his throne for a brief period. As a direct result of Erra's oppression of the Oriental Olympus, the King of the Gods is enfeebled and the world temporarily thrown out of kilter and plunged into darkness.⁶¹⁹

Conventional scholarship has typically sought to understand the meaning of the *Poem of Erra* by reference to political events in the first millennium BCE. L. Cagni, for example, the translator of the poem, supposes that a Sutilian raid upon Babylon inspired the imagery therein (the Sutilians were a nomadic people whose periodic raids upon Mesopotamian cities represented a scourge to civilized peoples of the second and first millennia BCE). Other researchers have offered similar opinions.⁶²⁰ It is our view, however, that while political events may well be alluded to in several passages of the poem, its central theme—Erra's assault upon the kingdom of Marduk—is theogonic in nature and was originally inspired by celestial events. Indeed it seems quite clear that the *Poem of Erra* describes a cataclysmic episode(s)

⁶¹⁷Luigi Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (Malibu, 1977), p. 5. See also the discussion in P. Machinist, "Rest and Violence in the Poem of Erra," in *Studies in Literature From the Ancient Near East* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 221-226.

⁶¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 20. This invasion has been dated from 1400 to 750 BCE. See the discussion in D. O. Edzard, "Irra (Erra)—Epos," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 5, ed. by E. Ebeling and B. Meissner

involving several planets, the end result of which was a significant shake-up of the ruling powers in the heavens.

We are not the first to consider the possibility that the *Poem of Erra* was concerned with celestial events. De Santillana and von Dechend drew a similar conclusion in *Hamlet's Mill*: "It is evident that the events of the Flood in the *Era Epic*, however vivid their language, apply unmistakably to events in the astral heavens and to nothing else."⁶²¹

Excerpts from the poem confirm this opinion. In one passage, for example, Marduk is made to announce (with apparent reference to an earlier cataclysm) that should he rise from his seat flood and dissolution of the government of heaven would result:

"I rose from my seat, and the government of heaven and earth dissolved. And the sky, lo!, it shook: the stations of the stars in the sky were altered, and I did not bring (them) back to their (former) positions."⁶²²

Gössmann's translation of this passage is as follows:

"When I stood up from my seat and let the flood break in, then the judgment of Earth and Heaven went out of joint...The gods, which trembled, the stars of heaven—their position changed, and I did not bring them back."⁶²³

A straight-forward reading of this passage finds that as a result of Erra's assault Marduk rose from his seat, thereby changing the order of the solar system. De Santillana and von Dechend, in accordance with their uniformitarian theoretical framework, claimed that this passage forms "the clearest statement ever uttered by men or gods concerning the Precession [i.e. the precession of the equinoxes]."⁶²⁴ This interpretation, however, while certainly on the right track, is precluded by other events associated with Erra's revolt.

(Berlin, 1957-1971), pp. 168-169. See also P. Walcot, *Hesiod and the Near East* (Cardiff, 1966), p. 51.

⁶²¹Quoted from G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1977), p. 323.

⁶²²L. Cagni, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁶²³G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

⁶²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 325.

As a result of Erra's assault, the world was plunged into darkness and Marduk forced to descend to the Netherworld, the darkness and Marduk's displacement apparently being related.⁶²⁵ Thus Erra is made to announce:

"I want to annihilate the brilliance of Sulpae [an epithet of Marduk]...I want to attain the seat of the king of the gods so that his counsel be not forthcoming."⁶²⁶

In an analogous passage Erra is made to state: "I shall quench the glory of the beams of Samas...To the king of the gods I shall say 'Dwell in Esagila' [the underworld]..."⁶²⁷

Here it is scarcely necessary to point out that precession of the equinoxes does not involve an eclipse of the sun or a darkening of the heavens. Nor, for that matter, are such phenomena characteristic of raids by nomadic renegades like the Sutians. To interpret the *Poem of Erra* in such fashion is to misinterpret it and makes a mockery of its carefully chosen language. Difficult as it is to accept, the clear meaning of the poem is that the heavens were disturbed and the planet-gods rearranged during Erra's assault.

THE REVERSAL OF ORDER

A common theme of theogonic myths is a reversal of order; typically, a period of chaos and instability following close upon the death, disappearance, or temporary disablement of the king of the gods—in this case the enfeeblement and displacement of Marduk. During this period of reversed order several other mythological themes may be present as well, including the temporary replacement of the king of the gods by an usurper; the rebellion or desertion of the king's faithful servants or spouse; the suspension of the king's government and its laws; the abrogation of religious practices; the despoliation of the king's land (i.e., plague overtakes the land or the land turns to desert); etc.

A careful reading of the *Poem of Erra* will find that virtually every one of these themes is associated with Erra's assault. Erra usurps Marduk's throne; the people, incited by Erra's presence, gather about the hero who has assumed the powers

⁶²⁵L. Cagni, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-36.

⁶²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 40.

befitting the king of the gods; the government of heaven is dissolved; customary religious practices are suspended; and, finally, under Erra's rule a dark pall hangs over the land, the land itself becoming barren.⁶²⁸

The following passage is indicative of this state of affairs:

"I shall cut off the life of the righteous man who acts as intercessor. The evil man, who cut throats, him I shall put in the highest place. I shall so change men's hearts that father will not listen to son and daughter will talk to mother with hatred. I shall cause them to speak ill and they will forget their god and speak blasphemy to their goddess."⁶²⁹

A passage quoted earlier is in a similar vein:

"I shall quench the glory of the beams of Samas...To the king of the gods I shall say 'Dwell in Esagila' [the underworld]...I shall destroy the cities and turn them into barren land...I shall get into the house of the gods, there where the evil man has no access. At the abode of princes I shall let the rogue dwell."⁶³⁰

Surveying the destruction wrought by Erra, Marduk laments:

"Of all the countries what is there left steady? He has taken the crown of his lordship: kings and princes...forget their ordinances...the bond between god and man is undone: difficult it is to knot again."⁶³¹

IDENTIFYING ERRA

The key to the poem's interpretation centers around the identification of Erra. According to Cagni, Erra represents "the hellish aspect of every war."⁶³² Another leading authority, J. Roberts, offered a similar opinion: "The most characteristic portrayal of Erra is as a warrior, and, more specifically, as a warrior whose main weapon is famine."⁶³³

Roberts would trace the god's name to the Semitic root **hrr*, "to scorch," Erra's relation to igneous phenomena being proverbial. This evidence leads Roberts to the

⁶²⁸D. Edzard, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁶²⁹L. Cagni, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁶³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶³¹*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶³²*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶³³J. J. Roberts, "Erra - Scorched Earth," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 24 (1971), pp. 13-14.

following conclusion: “Erra was seen as the personification of the natural phenomenon resulting from a grass or forest fire—‘scorched earth’.”⁶³⁴

Yet if Erra was a personification of “scorched earth,” how are we to account for the relationship between Erra and war or famine? Roberts’ explanation is as follows:

“Famine can be the result of crop or grass fires—whatever their source—which turn fields or pasture into ‘scorched earth.’...Thus there appears to be no difficulty in deriving Erra’s role as a god of famine from his original character as ‘scorched earth.’ The same is true, of course, for Erra’s martial character, since it would have been an all too common experience that ‘scorched earth’ often springs from the burning and devastation created by war. Erra, then, as the personification of ‘scorched earth,’ which often results from war and may lead to famine, develops quite naturally into a warrior figure closely associated with famine.”⁶³⁵

While Robert’s explanation seems more than a little strained—it is equally conceivable that grass fires would be associated with fertility—the question facing us here is whether the imagery of the *Poem of Erra* is made understandable by his interpretation? I, for one, find it difficult to reconcile the cataclysmic imagery of the *Poem of Erra* with the “raging of a forest fire.” Does a forest fire blot out the sun? Or cause the powers in the heavens to become rearranged? Or cause great kingdoms and cities to change hands? Indeed, one would have to think that forest/grass fires must have been fairly common occurrences in ancient Mesopotamia and thus unlikely to inspire the cataclysmic imagery which pervades the *Poem of Erra*.

It is possible to offer a more satisfactory explanation of Erra’s character, one capable of accounting for most—if not all—of the essential characteristics of the god.

ERRA AND MARS

Erra’s identification with Nergal points the way.⁶³⁶ Cagni and Roberts both called attention to the resemblance between the two gods: They share the same consort

⁶³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶³⁶This identification can be traced back to at least the Old Akkadian dynasty. See the discussion in W. Lambert, “Studies in Nergal,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 30:5/6 (1973), p. 356.

(Mami); the same residence (Meslam); and an association with the same natural phenomena—war, pestilence, fire, etc.⁶³⁷

Neither scholar, however, considered the possibility that Erra might bear a relationship to the planet Mars. In point of fact, Erra was identified with Mars in Babylonian astronomical texts.⁶³⁸ Erra-like characteristics, moreover, were associated with the planet Mars in Mesopotamian thought, the forbidding nature of the red planet being everywhere apparent. Babylonian skywatchers described Mars as the “erratic star,” the “disaster bringer,” the star of evil, rebellion, and misfortune.⁶³⁹ Consistently associated with the phenomena of war, Mars was the warrior-planet *par excellence*.⁶⁴⁰

Names applied to the red planet likewise attest to its evil reputation amongst these earliest of astronomers. Consider the name *harabu*, signifying “to ravage, devastate, lay waste.”⁶⁴¹ This term is not only consistent with the ancient traditions associated with the planet Mars, it would appear to be cognate with the Semitic root **hrr*, “to scorch,” that regarded by Roberts as the root in Erra. The phrase *mustabarru mutanu*, understood by the Babylonians as “swollen with pestilence,” was applied to the planet Mars.⁶⁴² And in light of Roberts’ suggestion that the name of Erra derives from a root meaning “scorcher,” it is significant to note that a name of Nergal/Mars in Babylonian texts was *sarrapu*, “scorcher.”⁶⁴³ Indeed, Mars was viewed as the “fiery”

⁶³⁷While both Cagni and Roberts accept the ultimate identification of Erra and Nergal, the consensus of opinion seems to be that the two gods were identified in relatively late times, originally being separate entities. Schretter, however, sees Erra as simply another name for Nergal. See M. Schretter, *Alter Orient und Hellas* (Innsbruck, 1974), pp. 52-55.

⁶³⁸H. Lewy, “Istar-Sad and the Bow Star,” *Studies in Honor of Benno Landsberger* (Chicago, 1965), p. 277. See also E. Reiner, “Astral Magic in Babylonia,” *Trans. of the Am. Philo. Soc.* 85:4 (1995), p. 66.

⁶³⁹P. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 180. See also the discussion in M. Jastrow, “Signs and Names of the Planet Mars,” *Am. Journal of Semitic Languages* 27 (1910/1911), pp. 64-83.

⁶⁴⁰P. Jensen, *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier* (New York, 1974), p. 477.

⁶⁴¹F. Delitsche, *Assyrisches Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1896), p. 288.

⁶⁴²J. Schaumberger, “Planeten,” in F. Kugler, *Sternkunde und Sterndienst in Babel* Supplement 3 (Munster, 1935), p. 304. M. Jastrow, “Signs and Names of the Planet Mars,” *Am. Journal of Semitic Languages* 27 (1910/1911), p. 64, would translate the name as “satiated with pestilence.” U. Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology* (Copenhagen, 1995), p. 128, translates the name as “constantly portending pestilence.”

⁶⁴³K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 462. See also the discussion in E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), pp. 79-80.

planet throughout the ancient world. The Babylonian skywatchers called it the “firebrand.”⁶⁴⁴ A Hellenistic name for Mars—*Pyroeis*, “Fiery Star”—indicates that similar conceptions prevailed among the Greeks.⁶⁴⁵ In China, likewise, Mars was the fire-star⁶⁴⁶, said to portend “bane, grief, war, and murder.”⁶⁴⁷

Various omens associated with the planet Mars in Babylonian texts are also reminiscent of the deeds ascribed to Erra. Mars is directly associated with the usurpation of the king’s throne, for example: “If the Sun goes down (by an Eclipse) and Mars stands in its place, there will be an usurpator.”⁶⁴⁸ Significant here is the mention of the untimely going down of the sun, with Mars in attendance, recalling Erra’s boast that “I shall quench the glory of the beams of Samas...”

Other omens link Mars with the end of the king’s reign: “If the Moon in Nisan has a halo, and the red star...stands therein, the reign of the king will end.”⁶⁴⁹ A similar omen is as follows: “If at Venus’ rising the Red Star [Mars] enters into it: the King’s son will seize the throne.”⁶⁵⁰ Mars is elsewhere associated with the onset of famine: “If Mars reaches the road of the sun, scarcity of cattle. There will be famine.”⁶⁵¹

In view of these omens linking Mars to disturbances of the sun, a gloss appended to the last omen is most relevant to the thesis advanced here. It reads as follows: “Mars has reached Saturn.”⁶⁵²

Certainly it is significant to find the planet Mars explicitly associated with war, famine, rebellion, fire, and the usurpation of the king’s throne—the very themes which distinguish Erra in the *Poem of Erra*. Does this not warrant considering the hypothesis that Erra was originally but a personification of the planet Mars and that each of his characteristics—warrior-hero, death-bringer, scorcher, eclipse-agent,

⁶⁴⁴*Mikittim isati*. See the discussion in J. Schaumberger, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

⁶⁴⁵F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans* (New York, 1960), p. 27. See also the discussion in A. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen bei den indogermanischen Völkern* (Heidelberg, 1953), pp. 90-91.

⁶⁴⁶G. Schlegel, *Uranographie Chinoise* (Paris, 1875), p. 626.

⁶⁴⁷E. Schafer, *Pacing the Void* (Berkeley, 1977), p. 215

⁶⁴⁸P. Gössmann, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁶⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁶⁵⁰E. Reiner & D. Pingree, *Babylonian Planetary Omens* (Malibu, 1981), p. 49.

⁶⁵¹M. Jastrow, “Sun and Saturn,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’Archaeologie Orientale* 7 (1909), p. 165.

⁶⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 165.

rebel, famine agent, etc.—corresponds to ancient conceptions associated with the red planet?

In what might be regarded as a classic example of unconscious knowledge, Cagni describes the uprising of Erra as follows, completely oblivious to the planetary nature of the god: “Like a star...it is fated that Erra be a cunning destroyer at the vertex of the orbit and just as fated that he descend and wane.”⁶⁵³

We could hardly have put it better ourselves.

In Nergal/Erra one is confronted by what could properly be called the quintessential Martian character: agent of war, pestilence, eclipse, rebellion, and destruction. Warrior-hero *extraordinaire*. Such gods are hardly peculiar to the ancient Near East—on the contrary, they will be found throughout the ancient world.

The modern name for the red planet, of course, derives from the cult of the Latin war god. According to conventional scholarship, the Latin Mars originally bore no relation to the planetary body, the red planet being arbitrarily assigned the name of the Latin god through assimilation to Ares. It is our opinion, however, that modern scholars have been unwise to overlook the Latin god’s connection with the red planet.

INDRA’S THEFT OF THE SUN-GOD’S WHEEL

A fascinating episode alluded to in several passages of the *Rig Veda* tells of the primeval occasion during which Indra absconded with the wheel of the ancient sun-god and flung it across heaven as a quoit-like weapon: “Empowered by thine own might, O Sage, thou stolest Surya’s chariot wheel.”⁶⁵⁴ The same event seems to be the subject of the following hymn: “Waxed strong in might at dawn he tore the Sun’s wheel off. Bright red, he steals away their speech.”⁶⁵⁵ Here, as elsewhere in the *Veda*, Indra is described as being red in color, a significant detail indeed if the Indian war-god was actually the planet Mars, the red planet *par excellence*.

In these hymns, the word translated as wheel is *cakra*—cognate with English wheel and Greek *kuklos*.⁶⁵⁶ The same term, however, can also connote a discus or

⁶⁵³L. Cagni, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁶⁵⁴I:175:4. See also II:11:20, VI:31:2-3, IV:16:12 and IV:30:4.

⁶⁵⁵I:130:9

⁶⁵⁶J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, 1987), p. 36.

quoit employed as a weapon.⁶⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the *Rig Veda*, for example, Indra hurls the *cakra* in order to scatter the Asura-demons.⁶⁵⁸ Of Surya's wheel, Griffith observes: "Indra is said to have taken the wheel of the chariot of the Sun and to have cast it like a quoit against the demon of drought."⁶⁵⁹

As is the case with most archetypal symbols, the imagery associated with Surya's wheel eventually became attached to the wheels of more mundane vehicles:

"Just as in the above instances the authors of the hymns seem to have associated the image of the sun's 'wheel' with the *cakra* as a mythical weapon of Indra, so do they appear to have connected in their imagination the latter with the wheel of the war-chariot."⁶⁶⁰

Just how to understand the episode of Indra's throwing or otherwise dislodging the wheel of the Sun is a long-standing problem.⁶⁶¹ Equally difficult to decipher are other passages alluding to Indra's role in setting the wheel of the Sun in motion.⁶⁶² Confronted with these recurring traditions, Vedic scholars offer vague allusions to some type of nature allegory, if they offer any opinion at all. The most common interpretation would regard the tossing of the wheel as a figurative reference to the daily movement of the Sun across heaven. Such an interpretation, however, is hardly satisfactory as it disregards entirely the identity of Indra and the nature of the *cakra*'s function in ancient myth (i.e., its role in the dragon combat).

If we are to reconstruct the original celestial events behind these peculiar traditions, we must start at the beginning and ask what it was that the ancients had in mind when they spoke of the wheel of the Sun?

THE WHEEL OF THE SUN IN ANCIENT PICTOGRAPHS

Throughout the ancient world there can be found prehistoric pictographs which, in the opinion of leading scholars, depict the ancient sun-god. Diagram X provides a

⁶⁵⁷See here the valuable discussion of O. Wijesekera, "Discoïd Weapons in Ancient India," *The Adyar Library Bulletin* 25 (1961), pp. 250-267.

⁶⁵⁸VIII:85:9

⁶⁵⁹R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁶⁶⁰O. Wijesekera, *op. cit.*, p. 257. See also the comments of M. Sparreboom in *Chariots of the Veda* (Leiden, 1985), pp. 13-27.

⁶⁶¹See the discussion in O. Wijesekera, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-257.

⁶⁶²4:16:12

typical example. The resemblance to a wheel is striking, a fact which has not escaped the notice of scholars.⁶⁶³ In a further elaboration of the imagery, the “solar wheel” may be set atop a pillar-like appendage (see diagram X). Yet if we are to take this image as an objective representation of the Sun, what are we to make of the strange spoke-like forms emanating from its “hub,” frequently four or eight in number? The simplest answer, of course, would be to assume that the terrestrial symbol (the wheel) has influenced the artistic rendering of the celestial object (the Sun). This explanation, however, would appear to be ruled out by the fact that many of these pictographs predate the appearance of wheels.⁶⁶⁴ Whatever their explanation, it seems clear that if we are to discover the original significance of Surya’s wheel these pictographs offer a promising lead.



Figure One

Figure Two

Given the fact that such pictographs are difficult to reconcile with the appearance of the current Sun, the possibility presents itself that some other celestial phenomenon served as their point of reference. Indeed, upon analysis of these prehistoric images we arrived at the conclusion that their subject—the ancient sun-god—was actually the planet Saturn.⁶⁶⁵ The spoke-like body set upon the face of the sun-god we identified with the planet Venus, the latter body being depicted as an eight-pointed star in ancient Mesopotamia as elsewhere (see diagram).⁶⁶⁶ Here archaeoastronomers are confronted by yet another anomaly: Ancient artists routinely placed the planet Venus

⁶⁶³E. Anati, *Camonica Valley* (New York, 1961), p. 163.

⁶⁶⁴See the discussion in M. Green, *The Sun-Gods of Ancient Europe* (London, 1991), pp. 22-25, 57.

⁶⁶⁵E. Cochrane, “Suns and Planets in Neolithic Art,” *Aeon* III:2 (1993), pp. 51-63.

upon the face of the ancient sun-god, in striking contradiction to reality (i.e., Venus is rarely if ever visible during inferior conjunction)!⁶⁶⁷

In accordance with this celestial scenario, Venus was envisaged as the sun god's central eye—indeed, as a “wheel-like” eye.⁶⁶⁸ (The word Cyclops, as a name for the one-eyed monster or god, stems from the aforementioned root *kuklos*, signifying “wheel-like.”) Thus it is that numerous ancient cultures described the planet Venus by an epithet which translates as “Great Eye,” an epithet difficult to explain apart from the thesis defended here.⁶⁶⁹

In addition to Saturn and Venus, the planet Mars would also appear to be present in the iconography surrounding the ancient sun-god. One of the most common images finds a dark orb set immediately within the center of the Venusian orb (see diagram X).⁶⁷⁰ If this dark orb is to be identified with the planet Mars, as appears likely, we would have further evidence that during the time of the polar configuration, Mars' orbit was such that it periodically appeared to “enter into” the larger Venus.



Figure Three

Figure Four

Granted that this interpretation of ancient iconography has some merit, how might it be reflected in the cult of the Vedic war-god? If indeed Venus was envisaged as a

⁶⁶⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

⁶⁶⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 55-63.

⁶⁶⁸E. Cochrane, “The Birth of Athena,” *Aeon* II:3 (1990), pp. 25-26. Alternatively, Venus could be viewed as the hub of the wheel centered upon Saturn.

⁶⁶⁹Venus was known as *Nohoch Ich*, “Great Eye,” in Mesoamerica. See J. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Norman, 1971), p. 218. Polynesian Islanders, similarly, knew Venus as *Tamata-nui*, “Great-eye.” See M. Makemson, *The Morning Star Rises* (New Haven, 1941), p. 194.

wheel-like eye of the ancient sun-god, the planet Mars—according to the same mythical logic—would appear as the “pupil” of the Venusian eye. It is in this sense, perhaps, that we are to understand Indra’s epithet *Kumaraka*, signifying “pupil of the eye” as well as “little boy.”⁶⁷¹ This tradition finds a close parallel in Egyptian myth, where the god Shu is said to sit in the middle of the eye of his father Ra, the ancient sun-god.⁶⁷² And yet the Eye of Ra, according to leading scholars, is to be identified with the planet Venus!⁶⁷³ This latter myth has been likened to Plutarch’s claim that Heracles once sat in the middle of the Sun, Heracles being early on identified with the Egyptian god Shu.⁶⁷⁴

[A related conception finds the planet Mars being viewed as the archetypal son or child of the ancient sun-god. Hence the apparent relation between the word Mars and words connoting “young man” or “child.” Examples include the Greek *meirax*, “boy,” Old Indian *marya*, “young man,” and Akkadian *maru*, “son.”]

It stands to reason, moreover, that if Venus was envisaged as the wheel-like eye of the ancient sun-god, the red planet might easily be viewed as a miniature being of some sort, riding the larger wheel-like orb. Thus it is noteworthy that an exclusive epithet of Indra throughout the *Rig Veda* is *rathastha*, “car-rider,” the root *rath* being the same as that in the German *rad*, “wheel.”⁶⁷⁵

Indra’s intimate association with a wheel-like vehicle finds close parallels in the cults of other great war-gods. The Norse Thor, for example, was famous for his wagon.⁶⁷⁶ So too was the Slavic Perkunas, an acknowledged parallel to Indra and

⁶⁷⁰This glyph is taken from R. Heizer & C. Clewlow, *Prehistoric Rock Art of California*, Vol. 2 (Ramona, 1973), figure 74.

⁶⁷¹RV 8:69:15 See also the discussion in A. Coomaraswamy, “Loathly Bride,” in *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers*, ed. by R. Lipsey (Princeton, 1977), p. 356. See also D. Talbott, “Mother Goddess and Warrior-Hero,” *Aeon* I:5 (1988), pp. 41-54.

⁶⁷²*Papyrus Harris* 58. See the discussion in H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), p. 686.

⁶⁷³R. Anthes, “Mythology in Ancient Egypt,” in S. Kramer ed., *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Garden City, 1961), pp. 89-90. See also E. Cochrane, “The Birth of Athena,” *Aeon* II:3 (1990), pp. 18-26.

⁶⁷⁴Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 41. R. Roeder, “Schow,” *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 571. See also the discussion in T. Hopfner, *Plutarch über Isis und Osiris* (Prague, 1940), pp. 23, 185.

⁶⁷⁵M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 831.

⁶⁷⁶J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. I (Gloucester, 1976), pp. 166-167.

Thor.⁶⁷⁷ The only chariot fit for the Celtic warrior-hero Cuchulainn was known as Iubar.⁶⁷⁸ Yet the latter word appears as a name for the planet Venus in Latin and medieval sources alike.⁶⁷⁹ A similar situation, perhaps, is to be found in ancient Akkadian tradition, where Nergal is invoked together with his wagon, the latter called *margidda su*.⁶⁸⁰ Yet in Babylonian astrological lore the planet Venus was called *margidda*, “wagon, or van.”⁶⁸¹

In light of our earlier discussion of the World Pillar, it is significant to note that numerous scholars have documented that the axle of the wheel is to be identified with the World Pillar or Cosmic Axis (the terms axle and axis are cognate).⁶⁸² Inasmuch as Indra is identified with the World Pillar in Vedic and post-Vedic sources alike, the question arises as to his possible association with the axle?

Here the Vedic sources leave little room for doubt upon the matter. Indra himself is intimately associated with the axle of the wheel: “Thou movest...Bold One, the axle of the car. Satakratu [Indra], thou...stirrest the axle with thy strength.”⁶⁸³ Of this hymn, Griffith writes: “The lines in this and the following stanza referring to the axle and the chariot or wain are somewhat obscure and have been variously interpreted.”⁶⁸⁴

While the foregoing passage was a source of befuddlement to Griffith, the war-god’s association with the axle follows directly from our thesis, whereby Indra is identified with the planet Mars. As the red planet was intimately associated with ancient conceptions of the Cosmic Axis/World Pillar—which itself formed the axle of the ancient sun-god’s wheel—it follows that Indra/Mars would be indissolubly linked with the axle of the sun-god’s wheel.

⁶⁷⁷M. Gimbutas, “Perkunas/Perun: The Thunder God of the Balts and the Slavs,” *Indo-European Studies* I:4 (1973), p. 466.

⁶⁷⁸A. Nutt, *Cuchulainn: The Irish Achilles* (London, 1900), p. 9.

⁶⁷⁹J. Sammer, “An Ancient Latin Name for Venus,” *Kronos* VI:2 (Winter 1981), p. 61.

⁶⁸⁰E. Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 38.

⁶⁸¹F. Weidner, “Fixsterne,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* III (Berlin, 1957-1971), p. 81. See also the discussion in E. Reiner, “Astral Magic,” *Trans. Am. Phil. Soc.* 85:4 (1995), pp. 57-58.

⁶⁸²M. Sparreboom, *Chariots of the Veda* (Leiden, 1985), p. 25.

⁶⁸³I:30:14

⁶⁸⁴R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 18.